



NOBIRU KUSUNOKI
Illustrator ARICO

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The
Reincarnated Prince
and the
Twilight Knight

The Epic Tale of the Reincarnated Prince Herscherik

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Prologue: The Summer Before, the Jobless Young Man, and the Mountain of Paperwork

On a hot day that seemed to announce the arrival of summer, a young man was called to his father's office. He knocked on the door of the room in question and entered. The Marquis Roland Aldis, former general of the royal army, was awaiting him with a raised brow. Roland had resigned his post earlier that spring, as he was beginning to feel the effects of his encroaching old age. Still, his body was built like a mountain. The former general with burning red hair glared down his son.

Octavian Aldis, the third son of Roland Aldis who had graduated from the knight's curriculum at the royal academy the previous year, sighed inwardly. "You summoned me, Father?" he asked, without a shred of enthusiasm. Letting out another sigh as he noticed that Roland's glare had only gotten harsher, Octavian shrugged. The gesture shook his slightly curvy locks, which were the color of a melted sunset.

Octavian was a man with an attractive face. He was tall and fit, with curvy, shoulder-length hair carelessly tied off at the back of his head; his hair appeared completely orange at first glance, but it contained some shimmering gold highlights upon closer inspection. His downturned, sapphire-like eyes exuded a gentle disposition that was quite popular among the female students back when he'd attended the academy.

Roland looked away from his son in exasperation and shook his head. Then, he returned his gaze. "Octavian, they're holding a tryout for knights today. Go join it, now."

"Huh...?" Octavian blurted out.

"Did you not hear me? I told you to go. Now."

"Well, that's news to me. You said 'today'? Where am I supposed to go, anyway?" Octavian asked quickly. Then, he let out a long sigh as he let his

shoulders fall. “Besides... There’s no way I’ll make it. Even if I did, I don’t even *want* to be a knight.” He twisted his attractive face in disgust. “I’m not going.”

Octavian turned right around, reaching for the door handle. Just then, something flew by his ear with a *whish*, followed by the sound of something striking the wall. Octavian carefully turned toward the source to find a blade, polished thoroughly enough to reflect his back at him like a mirror, stuck into the wall. And it was no run-of-the-mill weapon, but the very claymore favored by Roland. The blade spanned the length of Octavian’s shoulders down to his toes and was easily as wide as his face. This claymore, built more for crushing than cutting, was stuck at a right angle into the door. Octavian assumed that the blade had sliced clean through the wood.

“Who said you could leave?” Roland growled.

Octavian only slumped his shoulders in defeat. He knew that his father could not be dissuaded once he was in this kind of mood. The only way to do so would be to best him in a contest of strength, but the only person who could possibly pull that off in the Aldis family was Octavian’s oldest sister.

That very sister had left on a journey to find and marry the strongest man she could. If one were to actually ask her, though, she would say that the whole groom thing was just an excuse for her to go train by herself. Without that excuse, she worried her father would force her into an endless series of marriage interviews, for fear that she would grow too old to be a bride.

Octavian turned away from the claymore in the door and finally faced Roland.

“I’ve waited half a year since you’ve graduated from the academy. All you’ve done is loaf around the house.”

“I mean, I haven’t stopped training every...” Octavian meekly tried to retaliate, but he was immediately silenced by Roland’s glare, wordlessly commanding him to shut his mouth.

“In my house, those who don’t work don’t eat. I can’t just keep you here when you don’t even *try* to get a job.”

Octavian frowned. “I told you, I’ll go on a training journey, too—”

“You will *not* abandon this house.” Roland immediately shut him down.

Octavian huffed in frustration. His two older brothers were already serving as knights. As the third son, he wouldn't be inheriting the family business, either. So, as a result, Octavian wanted to travel the world. If he needed some sort of paper to get through borders, he would join a mercenary guild. But no matter how many times Octavian proposed the idea, his father had never allowed it. *Do you want me to stay here or not...? What am I supposed to do?* Octavian gave his father a disdainful look.

Roland presented him with a piece of paper. "This is where the tryouts are being held. Just go."

With another long sigh, Octavian accepted the paper in defeat. His father was never the type to listen to criticism. The only exception to that was Anne, Octavian's mother and Roland's wife. When he served as a general, he'd hardly even listened to half the input he received from the other commanders or the Minister of Defense, but he had always listened to Anne. Octavian's mother was always smiling, and she was equally kind to children, his father's former subordinates, and even her household servants. Although... Octavian had always wondered why his father would occasionally go pale when he saw Anne smile.

Right, Octavian thought. I'll talk to Mother, so—

"Don't bother speaking to Anne about it. This was her idea. If you don't go, I'm going to be in big trouble. I don't want to die just yet," Roland noted, as if he could read Octavian's mind.

Octavian saw that his father was slightly trembling, blood drained from his face. He decided not to dig into it and reluctantly agreed to attend the tryouts. *Where am I going...?* He glanced down at the paper and immediately regretted not fleeing the house in secret to go on his journey of self-improvement.

After some time, Octavian finally walked through the front gate to his family manor, his feet dragging. As if to push him in the right direction, an early summer breeze fluffed his sunset-colored hair.

That same early summer breeze rushed in from an open window, tossing papers into the air like flower petals. As the ink-scented petals danced in the

wind, the master of this room—who had been sleeping with his head down on a fine desk—was awakened by the cooling breeze brushing through his hair.

“What a disaster...” he grumbled, seeing the state of his room. The papers that he had organized by timeline and category were all scattered and jumbled together.

The boy defeated by his room’s disarray was Herscherik Gracis, Seventh Prince of the Gracis Kingdom. He had just turned five this year, and his butler of service called him Hersch. In his previous life, he had been a woman named Ryoko Hayakawa. She’d been an officer worker in a major corporation in an island nation known as Japan, and had died in a car accident the day before her 35th birthday. Ryoko had a serious case of “Otaku-ism,” and everyone thought she would spend the rest of her days with her fictional lovers safely inside book pages and TV screens. Upon her death, though, she was reincarnated as a prince, but with the memories of her previous life intact. Prince Herscherik (formerly Ryoko) had fair golden hair that looked like solidified sunlight, neatly trimmed so it barely brushed the top of his ears. His eyes were the color of pure jade. He had inherited his features from his father, who was one of the most beautiful men in the country. Still, Herscherik’s appearance paled in comparison to his siblings, much to his disappointment.

Ryoko Hayakawa (now Herscherik Gracis) jumped off the leather sofa that was too large for him and started gathering the scattered papers. He was in his office—which was really more like a study room, considering his age. The room was smaller than his bedroom or the living room, but it was large enough to fit a table and chairs for any guests in addition to his desk and sofa. Bookshelves lined the walls that were papered in a calming emerald green. In truth, the room was much too extravagant for a five-year-old. Still, there were more books than blank spaces on those bookshelves, and the piles of overflowing volumes covered most of the desk and floor, along with the mountain of paperwork Herscherik had gathered in secret. In his own words: “I know where everything is.” Ironically, he had once criticized the disarray of someone *else’s* office. While Ryoko had always kept her room as tidy as the average teenage boy, no one was around to criticize Herscherik for his disorganization.

Just as Herscherik lazily moved to retrieve his scattered papers, he was

startled by a sound from above him. It wasn't a divine intervention, though, but a simple knock at the door.

"Excuse me, Prince Hersch. I've brought you your drink."

It was the butler of service to the Seventh Prince, Schwarz Zweig—aka Kuro. He had glossy black hair and sharp eyes that shone like dark rubies, and his butler's uniform was immaculate despite the heat. While he had already grown quite popular among the handmaidens of the royal quarters, he never seemed to care one way or the other.

"Perfect timing, Kuro!" his master called to him.

Kuro took a quick glance at the disaster within then bowed with a charming smile as he slipped out of the room and closed the door, all in one fluid motion.

"Hey, wait! Don't leave! You're ditching me!?" Herscherik cried.

The door reopened to reveal his butler, whose smile had been replaced by a look of disdain. "How many times have I told you to keep the window closed, Hersch?"

"But—"

"No buts. Nothing flew out the window, did it?" he reprimanded in his usual, informal tone. "You can't afford to have anyone read most of these, right?"

"I don't think so..." Herscherik muttered, unsure. His green eyes met the red ones glaring down at him from far above, and he looked away. *But it's hot in here...* he wanted to protest. Kuro had, in fact, warned him about the window. When he closed it, however, the room grew too hot. There was a piece of equipment installed in the room that cooled it by expending Floating Magic, much like air conditioning, but Herscherik found the artificially chilled air to be *too* cold. On the other hand, leaving the window closed without the magical cold air would make the room hot enough to give him heatstroke. He had reluctantly resorted to working with the window open when he drifted off and caused this whole debacle.

Kuro sighed at Herscherik's visible disappointment then placed the drink on the table and headed to the window. After making sure there were no papers on the ground outside, he closed the window lest another gust of wind worsen

the situation.

“It’s hot...” Kuro’s master grumbled.

“Stop whining. It’s almost time, anyway. Get ready once you drink that.” Kuro pointed to the cold glass of tea he had just placed on the table. Then he began organizing the scattered papers.

Silently thanking his butler for helping him out—albeit not without some nagging—Herscherik sat on the sofa by the table and took a sip out of the cup. The chilled tea served as the perfect pick-me-up. Then he considered his butler’s remark. “Hm...? What’s today?” Herscherik tilted his head. As far as he could recall, he had no tutoring or practice scheduled. In fact, he’d planned to sneak out into the castle town in the afternoon.

Kuro let out another sigh (he’d let out a lot of those today) as he watched Herscherik struggle to remember his agenda for the day. “Tryouts for your knight of service,” he answered.

“Oh... right.” A “knight of service” was a knight that exclusively served one particular person, most often a noble or a member of royalty. Ordinarily, the person in question appointed the knight themselves. However, Herscherik’s father was worried enough about his son’s safety to host an actual tryout for the position. “I’m fine, anyway. As long as I have you,” Herscherik muttered.

Kuro halted for a moment. He immediately returned to the task at hand, but he now had a bit more energy in his step. “Turn them all down, then, if you don’t like them.”

Herscherik didn’t notice that Kuro’s tone was slightly elated. “That’s true,” the prince agreed. *I don’t want anyone who’s only after fame or status.* What he really wanted was an ally to his cause—a true comrade. Herscherik gazed up at the sky through the window; the clear blue expanse was letting him know that the day was only getting hotter. *I wonder what kind of people will be there...*

Herscherik finished his tea and placed the cup back on the table. The ice cubes made a refreshing *clink*.

Chapter One: The Prince, the Interview, and the Test of Skill

Herscherik had brought Kuro to a building in the western quarter of the castle, which was dedicated to the Gracis military. The prince looked over the steadfast stone masonry of the place, thinking that it almost seemed to embody the kingdom's strength and resilience.

"First time in the military quarters, Your Highness?" their guide asked Herscherik, who was looking to and fro as he walked beside Kuro. He was the instructor who had been teaching swordsmanship and martial arts to the young prince, and he would serve as the judge of the knight of service tryouts.

Although Herscherik had been told at his very first lesson that he had no talent for fighting, he had continued his training with the mindset that perseverance was true strength. Thanks to all of his hard work, Herscherik had completely surprised his instructor by rapidly improving in... nothing at all. No matter how much he trained, his hand-to-hand combat was sluggish, his bow never fired a straight arrow, and he didn't even build up any stamina or muscle in the process. The only skill he actually improved at, albeit at a snail's pace, was horseback riding. Even so, his instructor kept on teaching him patiently. Even though he was never rewarded with results, it wasn't in his nature to ignore anyone who worked hard. After Kuro watched Herscherik train for the first time, he'd silently patted his master's head after the fact. Herscherik, on the other hand, clearly saw the pity in Kuro's dark red eyes and was infuriated by it.

The physically-unfit-to-the-point-of-pity-from-his-butler Herscherik answered his instructor. "Yes, it's my first time. It's very interesting." *First time here during the day, at least*, he silently added.

As Herscherik had been conducting his nightly investigative journalism since age three, he'd left hardly any stone unturned in the castle. Those unturned stones included the private quarters of his father, his siblings, and the queens;

the heavily guarded treasury and jewelry room; and the archival room of each department that kept documents related to national security and were guarded by magical barriers for that reason.

Herscherik had once been curious enough to ask his former-spy butler to help him obtain those papers, but Schwarz denied the request without a second thought. He had said: “Can’t do it.” Herscherik was shocked, and his eyes widened in disbelief. He’d never expected that from Kuro, who’d always seemed to handle any impossible task with aplomb. Kuro had flashed a frown in response, adding: “I could do it by destroying a few pieces of stupidly expensive equipment. Are you good with that?” Herscherik hurriedly retracted his request, secretly reevaluating Kuro as more of a meathead than he’d thought. Kuro seemed to sense the prince’s judgment and tightened his frown. “You need knowledge *and* magic to break barriers. I have the former, but only an average amount of magic. It’s easier for me to destroy the equipment than the barrier itself.” *So I’m not a meathead*, was his implication. Herscherik decided to go along with it.

Herscherik recalled that conversation as they followed his instructor through the military quarters. Finally, they arrived at a room fully chilled by the cooling equipment powered by Floating Magic. Herscherik’s potential knights of service were already there, twenty of them in all. Their ages ranged from a fresh academy graduate of nineteen all the way to thirty, and every single one of them was in perfect shape. Herscherik, who struggled to put on any kind of muscle and was often mistaken for a girl, couldn’t help but be jealous.

“Welcome, Prince Herscherik,” greeted Rook, the butler of service to the king.

Despite being the same age as the king—who looked young and handsome enough to be in his twenties—Rook’s appearance actually matched his age. He had steel-colored hair that was darker than emerald green and sharp, black eyes that shone in the same color as his hair under light. How his butler’s uniform perfectly contoured to his well-built physique was reminiscent of the ultimate butler of Ryoko’s dreams. Herscherik was sure that Ryoko would have been charmed to death if Rook had ever called her “mademoiselle” in his deep, steady voice.

“I will be in attendance today in the place of His Majesty.”

“Thank you, Rook.” Herscherik answered the butler’s expert bow with his own.

A butler of service was trusted enough to perform duties in their master’s stead. In fact, Rook might have held the highest status of anyone in the room. This might have contributed to how Herscherik’s mood rapidly declined once the interviews for his knight of service began.

With Kuro standing behind him, Herscherik sat in the middle chair of the three set up behind a long desk, with Rook and his instructor sitting on either side. However, he couldn’t keep from groaning on the inside. He had heard nearly eighty percent of the candidates speak, but none of them had bothered to make eye contact with their supposed potential boss, much less speak directly to him. They almost all looked directly at Rook, with occasional glances at his instructor. They did all give Herscherik a deep bow at the beginning, but they never actually spoke to him, as if Herscherik wasn’t even there. Kuro noticed his master getting tired of the process but did nothing about it. The potential knights had been essentially ignoring the young prince so far. That being said, neither Herscherik nor Kuro could really blame them for that. Every candidate applying to be a knight of service to the youngest of seven princes (a mere five-year-old) was really only after the status of the position. They had no intention of truly pledging their loyalty to Herscherik. A knight of service was regarded as the same rank or higher than a royal guard, an elite among knights. While their status would differ depending on whom they served, it was an opportunity for knights to climb the career ladder nonetheless. What’s more, the king’s right-hand man was conducting the interview. If they made a good impression now, they thought, they might even reach the rank of general some day. In fact, many of the military’s generals were former knights of service.

Herscherik understood that dynamic, and he also understood that someone like Kuro, who swore loyalty to a five-year-old, was an outlier. *I don’t even have to be here, do I?* Just as Herscherik was beginning to check out, the final candidate rose to his feet. He was rather skinnier than the other candidates, with slightly wavy, sunset-colored hair shot through with natural golden highlights. His downturned sapphire eyes gave off a gentle impression, but he stared directly at Herscherik and gave a bow.

“My name is Octavian. An honor to meet you, Prince Herscherik.” Then, he gave Herscherik a full smile. The prince was taken by surprise. Unlike the other candidates, Octavian did not look away from him even after bowing.

“Please tell us why you applied for the position,” Rook began.

Octavian maintained his smile and said, “My father forced me to.”

Herscherik slid right off of his chair at the comical response—or he would have, anyway, if he didn’t know better than to drop his princely facade.

“Your father...” Rook looked down at his application. “...is General Aldis.” He seemed impressed.

“He would do something like that...” The instructor acknowledged.

The mention of his name caused the other candidates to mutter to each other. Herscherik looked back and forth between Rook and his instructor in search of an explanation. “General Aldis?”

“The General is retired, so Your Highness has never met him,” his instructor said obligingly. “General Aldis is a former high-ranking member of the royal army.” He had been the kingdom’s sword, always leading the charge with his red hair fluttering like flames. No enemies remained standing in his wake. He was so infamous that many soldiers in neighboring nations started to fear the very sight of red hair. “General Aldis has earned the moniker of the Blazing General.”

“Although...” Rook took over the explanation. “General Aldis *did* win every battle he fought, but he was a difficult man to handle.”

Accordingly, he had often discarded any detailed strategy that was “too complicated” for him in favor of charging headfirst into the enemy. He always got better results than were predicted for the complex tactics he rejected, though, so he never took blame for it. His men had, however, always ended up having close brushes with death.

No matter how powerful the general was, they couldn’t let him charge into enemy lines alone. The general’s men had always returned from battles like they’d had their very souls drained of life—except for his second-in-command, who had always enjoyed a smoke after a battle, as if he had just come in from a

stroll through the park. Eventually, the general's men (sans his second-in-command) came crying to Herscherik's grandfather, the previous king.

General Aldis had also been the previous king's knight of service. He did reprimand the general, even though he knew full well that Aldis would not even listen to the king himself. The king had considered punishing him in some way, but it seemed unjust to punish a general who had won every battle he fought. Naturally, the military began to strategize around the assumption that General Aldis would always be charging headfirst into battle. While the rate of injury among his men drastically improved over time, his second-in-command ended up carrying most of the burden of those operations.

"He *really* doesn't listen to anyone..." The instructor repeated, thinking back on it. Somehow, he suddenly seemed older than he had when he'd entered the room.

Herscherik gave him a sympathetic look, wondering if his instructor was among the men who had begged his grandfather for a solution.

"That's my father. He told me to go get a job," Octavian clarified.

"You graduated from the academy this year, right? Didn't you finish the knight's curriculum?" Rook asked.

The academy was an educational institution run by the government of Gracis. The students there were mostly royalty, nobles, the exceedingly wealthy, and the exceptionally talented who attended the academy on scholarships. Once they started secondary education some years into their academic career, students were divided into a specialized curriculum. The academy offered a variety of these curricula, ranging from fantastical career paths like knighthood and sorcery to more mundane pursuits like science and economics. Students chose their desired curriculum and studied in preparation for a career path in that field. In a few years, Herscherik would begin to attend the academy, too.

School... I never thought I'd have to do that again. He recalled how Ryoko'd felt when she'd graduated from college. It was a wonderful sense of freedom, knowing that she never had to study for anything ever again. Of course, it turned out there were plenty of things she had to study for once she made it out in the workforce, too.

“But you didn’t try out for the Knights’ Order,” Rook added, reading through the application.

Herscherik followed along. He had no interest in any of the other candidates, so he hadn’t even touched the papers in front of him yet. But now, he was very curious about the young man with the sunset-colored hair.

“No, I wasn’t interested,” the man said nonchalantly.

The instructor arched his brow at that answer, and the other candidates began muttering among themselves again. The minimum requirement for becoming a knight, with some exceptions, was to graduate from the knight’s curriculum at the academy. Even the curriculum itself accepted only a small portion of its applicants and was very difficult to get into. Students who graduated from such a prestigious line of study went through tryouts to become full-fledged knights. The tryouts were not designed to accept or reject certain candidates but served more as a placement exam. In short, any graduate of the knight’s curriculum became a knight sooner or later, barring some incredibly rare situations. While some knights had earned their title simply from proving their worth in combat as a soldier, they were the exception that proved the rule. This young man overturned what had become a natural way of this society with a simple “not interested.”

“You barely passed the knight’s curriculum,” Rook noted.

“Barely? The son of *the* General Aldis?” the instructor repeated, incredulous.

“I remember you had two older brothers,” Rook added.

The first and second Aldis sons were the up-and-coming stars of the Knights’ Order. While they were still young, all the knights rumored that they would soon be selected to become members of the royal guard.

“Unlike them, I’m a loser.” Octavian only shrugged.

Herscherik watched Octavian’s every move. Most people would show some sort of dislike for being called inferior to others. This young man, on the other hand, simply brushed it aside. Herscherik wondered if the young man agreed with that assessment or if he just had no interest in what others thought of him. Or else... Herscherik dug into the man’s application and widened his eyes. His

interest for Octavian only grew.

“Since a jobless loser has no place in our home—‘those who don’t work don’t eat’ and all... He forced me to come here.”

The murmuring of the candidates grew louder. They had pulled every string they could to make it to this interview. Some had begged their boss for a recommendation, some had to convince their parents to give them enough money for the opportunity, and some had showed up despite the envious bullying of their coworkers. Octavian being “forced” into trying out definitely rubbed them the wrong way.

Still, Octavian practically ignored the air in the room and added, “What do you think of such sayings, Prince Herscherik?”

His challenging tone took Herscherik by surprise, purely because it was the first question anyone had directed toward him during the entire course of the interview process. All questions from the other candidates were directed to Rook or his instructor, completely ignoring the prince.

Herscherik started to break into a smile. He carried thirty-plus years of Ryoko’s life experience with him, and in that sense, he had lived much longer than Octavian. The saying in question, by the way, was also a common phrase in the Hayakawa household—along with “wipe your own ass.” Quite the masculine motto, considering they had three daughters and no sons.

“Your parents sound wonderful. You can’t expect to live life without working for it.”

Herscherik’s answer was an odd one for a member of royalty, much less a five-year-old. Octavian showed a glimpse of surprise at Herscherik’s articulate response.

Oh, I see. Something clicked within Herscherik, and he grinned.

Later, the prince and all the candidates for his knight of service walked out onto the training grounds. This was a large area set up for soldiers and knights to practice their craft, surrounded by seats hewn from stone, like an amphitheater. The seats were used by anyone who wanted to observe the

training and by the audience during the combat games hosted in the spring and autumn of each year. It was customary for the king or another member of the royal family to attend the games, but Herscherik had no interest and was not required to attend them anyway, given his age. Still, he did recall how the castle felt like a festival on the days when games were held. During those events, ordinary citizens were allowed inside the castle, filling the austere, cold stone seats with energy. Pop-up shops filled the streets of the town, awaiting the audience members who would be convinced to loosen their purse strings from all the excitement. In fact, Herscherik believed that the games were actually quite an important holiday for the common people. It was also an opportunity for soldiers and knights to showcase their strength and the fruits of their training. Sometimes, the games allowed soldiers who would have otherwise been stuck at the rank of captain or lower to become knights, or knights to become royal guards. There was even one occasion in history when a member of the royal family joined and defeated all the kingdom's strongest warriors, but that was an extreme example. In the shadows, nobles placed bets on who would win. This was, of course, illegal.

Ryoko had always been a terrible gambler; her life was very short on luck, never winning even a single lottery in her life. It had become a tradition of hers to tell others that she paid to experience the *dream* of winning the lottery—which she did, indeed, daydream about. Of course, the people around her just took it as an excuse.

“Now, we'll hold a one-on-one sparring match to—” The instructor was interrupted by the adoring screams of women.

A crowd of beautiful handmaidens from the royal quarters and other parts of the castle had gathered in the training grounds. Their eyes were focused on none other than Schwarz, butler of service to Herscherik, who was standing among the knight candidates.

Kuro sure is popular, Herscherik thought. *He's so cool*. The prince's butler was handsome, well-built, and maintained a people-pleasing facade. Even his sense of mystique and the slight hint of a dark secret charmed all the girls around him. The looks Kuro garnered ranged from idolization to infatuation, but all of them were from admiring women.

Ryoko, in Herscherik's previous life, was a bona fide otaku who dedicated herself to the world of fiction. Naturally, she'd never had any real-world objects of affection, not even any live-action actors or models. She never knew any celebrities by name and could only recognize them once she was told what role they played in the latest TV drama. The fact that she could nevertheless identify voice actors by a single line of dialogue alone spoke to the terrifying potential of the otaku.

"I don't mind you sitting in the audience, but be quiet!" the instructor shouted toward the cheering handmaidens.

While the girls looked rather dissatisfied at the order, they all obliged. Herscherik could spot some soldiers, knights, nobles, and clerks in the audience, too. He wondered if they had skipped out on their work to be there, but he realized that a little break would only help their efficiency, rather than working without stopping for hours.

Seeing that the audience had simmered down, the instructor turned to the candidates. "While one-on-one sparring between candidates is customary, His Highness has requested that—"

"I'll take it from here." Herscherik stood up from his temporary VIP seat in the audience. The seats were built considerably higher than the training ground itself, so Herscherik was looking down on Kuro and the other candidates despite his short stature. "I *do* need a knight, but I don't need a weak one," he bluntly declared. "A *real* knight wouldn't lose to my butler, right?" Herscherik gave a brimming smile. Despite his adorable demeanor, this was a brutal request.

At this time, however, Rook was the only one who knew how brutal this scenario was. *He wants someone stronger than Shadow Fang...?* He realized that the prince was dead serious about selecting a knight he considered worthy, without any mercy or compromise. Rook frowned. He had no problem with Herscherik having high standards about his knight of service; he just thought that his standards were *too* high. That's how much more dangerous Kuro was than an ordinary citizen.

Oblivious to Rook's reaction, Herscherik orders his butler, "Take it away, Schwarz."

“Yes, My Liege.” Kuro bowed elegantly, a training sword on his belt. He usually preferred open-hand combat and the use of covert weapons like knives, daggers, and throwing weapons, but he was so skilled that he could wield most any weapon effectively.

The first challenger was a knight in his mid-twenties.

“Don’t get your ass beat by a butler!” a voice called from the audience, and the challenger answered with a wave.

Kuro ignored him, as well as the clamoring from the audience and even the cheering of the handmaidens. He was only waiting for his order.

“Step up, men,” the instructor called. The knight drew his sword and faced off with Kuro. Meanwhile, Kuro’s sword remained sheathed. “Sir Zweig, draw your sword.”

Kuro shook his head. “There’s no need for that.” He gave a handsome smile. Cheering erupted from the audience once again. It was an obvious cheap shot, but it seemed quite effective against his opponent. The knight was enraged by the insult, his face turning bright red as he narrowed his eyes at Kuro.

“But...”

“Let’s begin, Sir,” Kuro demanded of the hesitant instructor.

After a few moments, he sighed and raised a hand. “First palpable hit wins. Begin!” He swung his hand down.

Within five seconds, the knight’s sword struck the ground. After a moment, he fell backwards onto the ground as he watched Kuro sheath his sword. It all happened in the blink of an eye. Kuro had closed the distance as soon as the match began then drew his sword and knocked the knight’s weapon from his hands. Everyone but Herscherik and Rook were dumbfounded by the absurdly quick conclusion to the match, when the handmaidens’ cheer broke through the silence after a few beats.

This isn’t going to be much of a tryout... Rook groaned inwardly, having expected this outcome. He stole a glance at Herscherik, who sat beside him. The prince, who undoubtedly expected this result, didn’t show any sign of surprise or even excitement as he drew a large X across the paper in front of

him. Rook couldn't help but let out a silent sigh. He had narrowed down an already large pool of candidates to those whom he considered to have high potential, under the orders of King Solye. On top of considering their lineage and character, he made sure that none of them were under the thumb of the minister.

Herscherik was making his move in the shadows, under the cover of his youth. Surely the minister wasn't expecting a five-year-old to be forming a secret revolt against him. That being said, when his actions inevitably came to light, Herscherik would need tools to defend himself. While Kuro was a fearsome fighter, he was only one man. He could only protect the prince so much. This was the reasoning that Solye had given Rook for holding tryouts for the youngest prince's knight of service. Herscherik either didn't understand his father's intentions or understood it full well and ignored them in order to find the knight he really needed.

Rook returned his gaze to the training grounds to find that Kuro had already bested the third challenger. A mix of handmaidens cheering and voices questioning the absurd strength of the butler came pouring from the audience, but Kuro himself seemed completely unbothered as he extinguished each candidate's dream, one by one. He was simply too powerful, as if he had declared: "If you want to get to Hersch, you'll have to go through me." In most matches, Kuro knocked his opponent's sword out of their hand or struck them cleanly to end the fight in a single blow, without even giving their swords a chance to clash.

Finally, there was only one candidate remaining. Despite having taken on nearly twenty opponents, Kuro wasn't even out of breath. It was entirely possible that he hadn't even broken a sweat.

"Octavian Aldis, forward."

"Yessir." Octavian stepped forward with a casual response and gesture.

All of the candidates so far had drawn their swords before the match, primed for combat. Octavian, however, kept his sword sheathed like Kuro.

The instructor had learned not to reprimand him for this and simply raised his hand. "Begin!"

Metal clashed. Kuro stared at his opponent through the crossed blades.
His sword had been stopped for the first time.



Octavian, who had intercepted his blade, grinned as he parried Kuro's sword. Kuro put some distance between them, weapon held at the ready. The audience erupted with excitement at the sight of Kuro finally keeping his blade unsheathed.

"Thought so..." Herscherik muttered, which drew Rook's attention. Noticing that, Herscherik showed him a set of papers: Octavian's grades from the academy. "Until two years ago, he was top of his class at almost every subject in the knight's curriculum. I thought it was strange that his grades dropped to barely passing by the time of his graduation."

Both Rook and the instructor had looked no further than Octavian's final grades and didn't bother reading any further back. While his grades for general classes were thoroughly average, he had led his class in most of the knight's curriculum courses until two years ago. Those classes ranged from swordsmanship, lancing, and horseback riding to strategy, combat theory, and military science... They encompassed any and all knowledge and skills required of a knight. *He's more of a battle nerd than a model student... A battle otaku.* Otaku, by nature, had an extremely lopsided knowledge base. *If his name was a little different, like... Otakuvian... Otakuvian, the Battle Otaku! Ha!* Herscherik let out a guffaw, thoroughly amused. Rook and his instructor gave him a bamboozled look. Herscherik cleared his throat to cover it up and returned his attention to the battle heating up before him.

Even Herscherik, without any real training in combat, could tell how refined Octavian's movements were. He believed that the young man kept up his training regimen. With that kind of self-discipline, Herscherik struggled to imagine how he had dropped from the top of his class to the bottom. The young prince flipped through the papers on Octavian one more time and found a section detailing his behavior in the academy. He had been a favorite among teachers; his upperclassmen had looked after him while lowerclassmen had looked up to him. And then, after one particular day two years ago, his behavior completely changed. He regularly cut classes and scored just barely enough to pass every exam, as if he had done so on purpose. While duels were technically prohibited by the academy, he beat anyone who challenged him to a pulp, almost to the point of permanent injury. These incidents had earned a few

suspensions, but the academy had always found fault with his opponent upon investigations, which kept Octavian from being expelled entirely.

Something's not right, Herscherik thought. The illogical actions on his record, as well as the emotion that had been kindled deep within his eyes when Octavian first looked at Herscherik at the interview, were stuck in Herscherik's mind. So, he returned to watching the match again. The two young men were a close match. Whenever one attacked, the other parried and moved in to counter. The audience, the other candidates, and even the instructor were all silently watching the match on the edge of their seats.

In contrast to his surroundings, Octavian was unnerved. *What the hell... He's really the butler!?* The only people to have ever evenly matched him in the sword were his father, other members of his family, and some generals he was acquainted with. The man before him now was such a skilled swordsman that Octavian would have believed him to be a seasoned knight. He was more than evenly matched. At first, he was so intrigued by Kuro that he wanted to fight him with some degree of restraint then lose the match once he'd had his fill. Now, things weren't going according to his plan. Every time Octavian purposefully made an opening for Kuro to strike him, the butler immediately stepped back. *Nice try*, the butler's grin seemed to say. It was painfully clear to Octavian that the butler wasn't giving it his all either. He challenged Octavian with a taunting grin, assured that Octavian wasn't showing his full strength. It tickled the heart of a warrior within Octavian that always beat in search of a worthy opponent. The two young men decoded their opponent's quirks, sharpening all of their senses in order to find the slightest opportunity to strike, and faked openings to draw their opponent in. Completely unbothered by the gaze of the crowd, they discoursed with their blades.

"It's like they're dancing together," Herscherik muttered, impressed. With no talent in sword or combat, Herscherik had no way of gauging how strong they actually were. So, the clashing of blades that unfolded before him seemed like a rehearsed dance. *It's beautiful*, he simply thought.

However, this dance of swords would come to an abrupt end. Under the hot sun of early summer, Herscherik was beginning to lose both interest and focus. He'd never enjoyed watching sports, preferring to play them himself, no matter

how unskilled he was at them. “It’s hot...” he subconsciously muttered, barely loud enough for Rook beside him to hear.

Kuro, who could not have heard his master’s remark through the sound of clashing blades, halted for a moment. No one but Octavian noticed, but that single moment was enough for him to strike Kuro’s sword, which flew out of his hand and stuck into the dirt. Just as the sword hit the ground, Octavian’s blade pointed at Kuro’s throat. Their fist-clenching combat had concluded in an instant. After a long beat, the instructor declared the match. The crowd erupted in thunderous applause. Kuro took a bow and headed straight for his master. Octavian watched him leave as he gathered his breath. *A dog...?* For a moment, Octavian saw a dog running back to his master with a fiercely wagging tail.

When Kuro returned to Herscherik, he was carrying a tray with a cold glass of tea.

“How was he, Kuro?”

“He’s got real talent.”

These remarks, made as Kuro handed his master the glass, were unheard by anyone else. Kuro had had no intention of losing the battle, but he had to admit that he was distracted by Herscherik’s muttering for a moment. He also credited Octavian for not missing that opening. *Thought he was just some rich boy...* Kuro mused to himself. He found the swordsmanship of most knights to be formulaic and boring. Even though each fighter had their own idiosyncrasies in their movement, their attacks were all too easy for Kuro to foresee. He felt like he was taking candy from a baby as he defeated the other candidates. Octavian’s movements, however, were influenced by his style without being restricted by it. In fact, he had seen that Kuro was predicting his movements and started to vary his footwork, only to launch into an unexpected attack. In the end, Kuro had to admit that Octavian was the better swordsman. At some point in the match, Kuro realized he was forced to be on the defensive more often than not. *I guess this is what you call a genius.* Octavian had genuine talent. Kuro imagined that, even if he had his weapons of choice *and* the element of surprise on his side, he wouldn’t be able to defeat Octavian—although he was confident that he wouldn’t absolutely lose, either. He could possibly squeak by to a victory if he used the skills he had acquired in the

underground, but Kuro wouldn't consider that a *true* victory. *Tsk. It's just like Hersch said.*

Before the match began, Herscherik had told his butler: "He's hiding something. I want to see his full potential."

Just as his master had requested, Kuro succeeded in showing Octavian's true strength, albeit not his *full* strength. *Screw this...* Kuro frowned, having accomplished the task given to him. A request from Herscherik meant everything to him. Not only would he do anything in his power to grant such a request, but he would do anything *outside* of his power, too. For his one and only master, he would do absolutely anything. Still, Kuro couldn't help but silently grumble once again, *Screw this*. He already knew the decision Herscherik was about to make.

"Kuro? Are you tired?" Herscherik asked with concern, as his butler fell silent. "Are you all right?"

His butler of service shook his head. "I'm fine." He immediately pasted a smile on his face, despite his growing disdain.

The candidates were told that they would be notified of the results at a later date and were then dismissed. As they cleared out, one young man was left on the training grounds. It was Octavian, fresh from his close match with Kuro. He was simply standing there, dumbfounded. He was supposed to lose on purpose. *I mean, the interview went terribly, he tried to convince himself. I won't get the position. It'll be okay.* He had acted with such a lack of etiquette in the face of royalty. He was sure that any knight who served the royal family would need a sense of devotion and respect toward them, in addition to swordsmanship. Octavian kept repeating that to himself.

The next day, an official summons for the knight of service was delivered to the Aldis manor. The workers of the house later said that it was quite the sight to see Octavian so dejected while the rest of the family seemed to expect this result with certainty.

And so, the formerly jobless Octavian Aldis was appointed knight of service to Herscherik Gracis, Seventh Prince of the Gracis Kingdom.

Chapter Two: The Prince, the Black Dog, and the Delinquent Knight

“Sir Oct.” A girl with long, dark locks called for Octavian.

Her hair was always tied up with a ribbon, whether one or two, or perhaps in a braid with the ribbon either tied in a bow or braided in. No matter the day, her hair always sported one of the ribbons Octavian had gifted her.

Octavian knew that the girl would not have enjoyed any expensive gift. Despite being born into nobility and a prosperous mercantile family to boot, she was humble, reserved, and unassuming. She had a sort of kindness that made her prioritize others over herself. She preferred the gift of a single wildflower over expensive jewels, but flowers wilted with time. So, Octavian had always gifted her ribbons—with his allowance while he was young, then with the meager pay he received from out-of-school training, like taking out monsters, once he started the knight’s curriculum at the academy. He had gifted her pink and red ribbons in his younger years, trying to anticipate what colors girls preferred. As he grew older, Octavian began to give her blue or orange ribbons, which he thought would make her think of him, as if to lay claim on her.

The girl turned around, shaking her long locks tied with one of the ribbons Octavian had given her. She smiled in joy. Octavian gently held her delicate hand in his, pulling her near to keep her close in his arms. He could feel her warmth washing over him. Octavian wanted only for her to smile by his side and was willing to do anything for that. He believed that he could keep her with him by graduating the academy, becoming a knight, and serving the country. He never doubted that she would ever stop smiling at him.

The sunset seemed to have lit the entire world on fire. Octavian was running away from the setting sun and the academy, rushing to one particular location. He was running through the upper-class residential area filled with the expansive manors of the nobility. He had run past a few of the neighborhood’s

residents on the way, and each of them had raised a brow upon seeing him. He certainly wasn't dressed like a noble, wearing his simple training garb covered in dirt.

Besides, the extravagantly-dressed residents of this area had always considered him a brute, since he was born from a knightly household. The Aldis family, despite holding the rank of marquis, were thought to be incompetent in everything but the sword. In fact, every member of the Aldis family knew that all they had to their worth was their martial prowess. Still, they used their skills proudly to defend their nation. Gossip among the typical rich nobles never bothered them. The entire worth of the Aldis family rested on serving as the sword and shield of Gracis. Defeat was never an option.

So, Octavian ran through the streets, unconcerned with any sidelong glances he drew. Even as he began to pant and his legs began to tremble, he didn't slow his pace.

Finally, he arrived at a familiar estate. Pushing past the steward of the house, Octavian ran up the stairs. He flung open the door to a particular room to find a group of people all sharing a pained look. The person he sought was lying on the bed with a peaceful expression.

"Why...?" Octavian whispered, but no one answered. Not that he was looking for one. All he could do was repeat that same word to the girl on the bed who looked no different than if she was only sleeping. "Why!?" Octavian cried. That girl—his fiancée—never answered him, smiled at him, or opened her eyes, ever again.

Octavian snapped awake to find himself gazing up at the familiar ceiling. Forgetting to blink, he listened to his fast and shallow breath and his heart hammering in his chest. As time passed, Octavian realized that he was in his own room and that he had only been dreaming. He took one deep breath, then another. As his breathing and heartbeat calmed, he sat up on his bed. His room was filled with muggy air, and the simple clothes he slept in were dampened with sweat, adding to his discomfort.

"That dream, again...?"

He pinched the bridge of his nose with his right hand and transitioned into brushing his bangs out of the way. Whenever the night became too hot to sleep through, he always dreamed of that day. Probably because that had been a similarly blistering day; Octavian cursed. Still, he had mixed feelings, knowing that the only place he could see her was in his dreams. Two years had passed since that twilight, but the scene had not faded in the slightest. In fact, it had only been carved deeper into his memory with time, the dream branding him in his heart all over again.

Octavian got out of his bed and flung open the window. Dawn had just come, leaving the sky outside still half dark. This was going to be his first day of work in the castle, according to the official letter of appointment that he had received the other day.

Octavian Aldis is hereby appointed the knight of service to His Highness, Herscherik Gracis, the Seventh Prince of Gracis Kingdom.

Signed,

Twenty-third King of Gracis Kingdom, Solye Gracis

The letter had read exactly that, in the king's own excellent handwriting with a special ink on a high-quality piece of paper. Anything written in this particular ink would never fade. The same was true for the royal seal that followed the king's signature.

"Me? The knight of service?" Octavian couldn't help but reread the letter, only to find that he had indeed read it right the first time.

The letter in question was open on his desk, where he had left it before going to bed the night before. Octavian *tsked* as he gave the paper a glance, recalling what had happened yesterday. He never even wanted to be a knight in the first place, much less a knight of service to royalty. Sure, he had dreamt of the job in some way when he was younger, but now he just wanted to clock that younger self in the face. That being said, if he refused the appointment without just cause, his family would be held accountable along with him. That might not matter to his father, since he was retired. But his older brothers would definitely end up on the bad side of their higher-ups, completely ruining their chances for promotions. While his brothers weren't the type to seek much

value in climbing the career ladder, Octavian still couldn't let them suffer for his sake.

Octavian threw off his clothes, drenched in sweat, and prepared to begin his daily training. It was a routine he had maintained ever since he could remember, and it had become a part of his daily life. On days that he had skipped this routine, he'd felt off all day.

After changing into new clothes, he took his trusty sword and turned to the door. Then, he noticed a wooden box on his desk, intricately detailed and small enough to fit in his palm. A gift he was never able to give to her, two years ago. One last gift. Octavian felt a bitter taste in his mouth.

"A knight...? Give me a break." The words he spat out dissipated into the morning, without anyone else hearing it or reprimanding him over it.

Once Octavian completed his training regimen, he took a shower in his room and changed into another set of clothes before heading to the dining room. There, he found his entire family sitting at the table, with the exception of his sister who was still out on her journey of self-improvement. As Octavian took his seat, the servants placed everyone's meals onto the table at once. The Aldis family, barring any special consideration, always took breakfast together.

"Are you going to the castle today, Oct?" the youngest sister began.

Now sixteen, this sister had been infatuated by the royal family's beauty ever since she'd first seen them at a ball. Octavian was frustrated at times by her pure adoration but knew better than to show it. It wasn't his sister's fault, after all.

"Yes. Paperwork and introductions in the morning, then I'm supposed to go see Prince Herscherik in the afternoon."

"Prince Herscherik...!" The youngest sister said, her eyes half closed as if she was in love. Octavian figured that if she was in love with anything, it was with the principedom in general rather than Herscherik himself. Octavian raised his brow at his sister's adoration, but she didn't seem to notice as she continued. "I've heard that Prince Herscherik has the most delicately beautiful golden hair... Like a mixture of His Majesty's moonlit hair and the famous locks of his mother, nicknamed the Sunshine of the royal quarters. And that he has emerald

eyes like His Majesty and the most adorable face...”

As his sister kept on daydreaming, Octavian recalled his encounter with the youngest prince during his tryout. *He did have blond hair and green eyes. Smaller than most children his age.* As he considered his assessment that wasn’t entirely flattering to Herscherik himself, Octavian dug into his memory about all of the other royals he’d heard about. Every single one was exceptionally attractive. The most noteworthy of these was Solye, who could pass for twenty despite turning forty this year. His age-defying handsomeness was sure to charm any woman. And the children of said king were all gorgeous in their own right. *They sure are popular.*

When Octavian had attended the academy, the first through sixth princes had also been in attendance. Whenever they walked through the halls, female students would flock to them like baby chicks following a mother hen. The female students also split up into factions based on who was their favorite prince out of the six. When those factions clashed, there was a different sort of tension in the air than the tension Octavian felt during a swordfight. Whenever those conflicts became a little *too* vicious, though, a saddened look from the First Prince and the cutthroat remarks of the Second Prince brought them to an end. After those conflicts subsided, the female students learned their lesson and turned to simply debating which prince was the most charming of them all. While that barely impacted the other students, all of this caused enormous psychological damage to the princes. Those factions still remained in the academy to this day.

A thought crossed Octavian’s mind. “What do the students at the academy now think of Prince Herscherik?” As far as he could tell, Herscherik was a stereotypical prince with his silky blond hair and his father’s eyes.

His sister seemed unsure of what to say. “The academy... Well, Prince Herscherik isn’t attending yet... and he’s so young... compared to the other princes... Well...”

Seeing his relatively forthright sister stammer, Octavian reached a conclusion. While Herscherik was beautiful by ordinary standards, people couldn’t help but be disappointed when comparing his looks to the rest of the royal family’s. Octavian couldn’t help but feel a little sympathy for the Seventh Prince who

found himself inferior just because the rest of his family was so ridiculously attractive—Herscherik was being judged for something out of his control, not by any skill he had or hard work he had put in.

“Stop talking and finish eating, already,” Roland remarked. “And have some respect for the royal family.” He lifted his cup of post-meal coffee.

Octavian hurriedly began to clear his plate. He glanced around the table to find that his parents and his two older brothers had already finished their breakfast.

“But Father, the reputation of the Seventh Prince isn’t exactly sterling inside the castle walls, either,” said the oldest brother. Four years older than Octavian, he had already earned the position of captain in the Knights’ Order. “He is smaller than other children his age. I’ve heard that he has no talents in physical activity or magic.”

“Oh, I’ve heard that, too,” the second oldest brother piped up from sipping his coffee. Two years older than Octavian, he had just returned from a very successful monster hunt the other day. “That hard-ass of an instructor was lamenting how he couldn’t get the prince to improve one bit through his own training. Members of royalty usually have something they excel at, don’t they? Everyone’s interested in the prince with *zero* talents.”

Octavian figured that his brother was talking about the instructor he’d met at the tryouts. He recalled Herscherik addressing him as such.

“That’s why the king’s given him a knight of service, right?” the second brother added. “He’s worried about the talentless prince.” Knights of service were seldom appointed before a member of royalty even began attending the academy. Any person with the title “of service” had to fully trust and be trusted by said royalty. Herscherik was too young to even have a butler of service, let alone a knight. “I guess His Majesty’s giving Prince Herscherik special treatment because he’s the youngest. They say the youngest is always the favorite, don’t they, Father?”

“The youngest... Is that true, Father?” The youngest Aldis sister turned to her father, her eyes filled with anticipation.

“Your father loves you all equally. Now finish your breakfast,” their mother

said, jumping in to the rescue. The youngest sister rushed to clear her plate.

“Anyway,” the second brother continued, “who would have thought that the *butler* of that unexceptional prince would be so strong?”

“Right?” the oldest agreed. “It’s been a while since I’ve seen Oct fight for real. He even goes easy on *us* lately.”

Still eating, Octavian frowned at the comment. Apparently, his brothers were among the audience during the tryouts. *Do your jobs!* Octavian silently chided them and avoided the second brother’s accusatory gaze by sipping on his coffee. As he did, he recalled the match from the other day. Herscherik’s butler was exceptionally strong. The extraordinary were drawn to other extraordinary people. Throughout the nation’s history, many of the king’s confidants were noteworthy figures themselves. The sagas of the kings of Gracis were filled with many stories about the extraordinary feats of their closest friends. This butler in particular just seemed too powerful for that young prince.

“So, we’d like to have a match with that butler. Thanks.”

“What do you mean, thanks? No.” Octavian immediately shut down his brother’s entitled request. *We’re a normal family until the topic of fighting comes up.* Octavian was well aware that he was the exception in the family. He glanced at his father to find him a little anxious looking and figured that *he* wanted to fight the butler, too, after hearing his brothers’ talk. They were all complete combat addicts.

“I should get going...” Octavian went to leave the table before his father began making requests.

“Wait,” his mother sharply called. “Were you going to go dressed like that, Octavian?”

“Yes, ma’am...?”

His mother was always gentle and kind, but still, everyone in the family couldn’t help but address her with the utmost respect.

Octavian took a good look at his outfit but didn’t find anything amiss. In fact, he was dressed just like his brothers did when they were on duty. He was scheduled to receive an official uniform for his position, but not for some time.

Until then, his manner of dress wasn't specified one way or the other.

His mother let out a quiet sigh at her third son, standing up from her seat. She smiled. "Listen carefully, Octavian. You are now Prince Herscherik's knight of service," she said, as if she was teaching Octavian an important lesson. "To be honest, you are now in a higher position than your retired father *and* your brothers in the Knights' Order. In other words, you now represent House Aldis." Confused, Octavian turned to his father and brothers to find that they seemed to agree with their mother. Octavian's heart beat faster. "I will not allow you to present yourself in this manner. *Especially* not on your first day," his mother declared. Unable to get a word in edgewise, Octavian was dragged back to his room by his mother.

Half an hour later, the exhausted Octavian left the manor for his commute, dressed so impeccably that he turned the head of every woman he passed, and headed to the royal quarters with heavy steps. It was already past noon. He had come to the castle first thing in the morning and had headed to the legal department where he was given a long orientation on his employment status, salary, *etc.* He read through the paperwork that accompanied his hiring and signed his contract. At that moment, Octavian officially became the knight of service to the prince, a servant of his nation.

Next, he headed to the military offices. This was something his father had instructed him to do—making a first impression, in a way. He was greeted by the instructor—a real hard-ass according to his brother—who was in charge of tryouts. The instructor introduced him to the higher-ups of the department. *Even they are scared... What did he do during his days in the military?* Each of the higher-ups looked frightened when Octavian's family name was mentioned. Unsure whether he should ask for an explanation or not, he headed down to the constabulary, where he was met with the same terrified faces. Octavian only grew more wary of his father. After that, he headed to the treasury where he was instructed on how to submit expenses before finally heading to the royal quarters, in the northern section of the castle.

On his way there, he heard some conspicuously loud comments made behind his back but responded with nothing but a shrug. *If they want babysitting duty, they just have to ask,* Octavian silently grumbled. That was his honest

sentiment. If he was going to serve a prince of appropriate age and in some sort of governmental position, he would expect some real tasks to come his way. A knight of service to a five-year-old prince, however, seemed no different than a babysitter with a fancy title. People might claim that being appointed a knight of service in of itself was an honorable distinction, but Octavian found no value in that, so he could only sigh as he imagined his days ahead.

And so, Octavian arrived at the gate leading into the northern section of the castle. The northern section consisted of the king and queens' royal quarters, the princes' outer quarters, and the princesses' gardens, as well as various facilities used by the royal family. With the permission of the gatekeeper, Octavian passed through the archway into the northern section and came out into the courtyard that opened to either side, carefully maintained by the royal family's dedicated gardener. he kept walking until he reached a fork in the passage, where he turned right to enter the outer quarters—his destination.

Octavian kept on until he reached a building twice the size of his family's manor and a young man standing before it.

"You're late," the young man said without so much as a "hello," making no efforts to conceal his irritation. He was Schwarz Zweig, the butler of service who had put up such an intense fight with Octavian during the tryouts. A young man whom his master called Kuro. "You were supposed to be here by noon. You can't even be punctual?" Kuro demanded, like a mother-in-law from hell.

Octavian frowned in response. The butler's attitude completely contrasted with how he'd loyally obeyed his master the other day. "Things don't always go according to plan, do they?" he countered. "I've been introducing myself to different departments around the castle. It's not like I was goofing off."

"Dressed like that?" Kuro gave Octavian a look from his head to toe, and scoffed. "You look more like a partygoer than a knight."

"That's because...!" Octavian's retort trailed off, silenced by his self-awareness. He was too embarrassed to say that his mother had forced his outfit on him. His hair was carefully brushed, and he wore an outfit that wasn't *too* extravagant for his status as a marquis's son but noticeably expensive. He himself had even wondered if he was actually going to be attending some sort

of party.



In his defense, the nobles of the court wore much more extravagant clothes than Octavian did on a daily basis. That only got worse the higher their position became in government. His mother had chosen the outfit with the intention of having him representing the family, even though she gave Octavian no say in the matter.

“The Prince has been waiting. Let’s go.”

“Keep yapping, black dog.” Octavian let this comment slip, causing Kuro to turn around from where he was about to lead the way. Kuro’s outfit was of a high quality, but it was entirely black. Because of his role as a butler and his personal aversion for flashy clothes, he mostly wore dark, calming colors. Combined with his dark hair, Kuro was almost entirely swathed in black. That, combined with Octavian’s previous impression of him as a loyal canine, caused him to mutter out “black dog.”

“Shut up, delinquent knight.” Kuro glared back at Octavian. *Knight of service? Don’t make me laugh. You’re just some delinquent knight.* Kuro had studied Octavian’s history, too. He had the ability to succeed but chose to tank his grades. He was a delinquent on and off campus... and now he was a *knight*.

One of Octavian’s brows shot up, and sparks flew between the two of them. It was possible that Kuro and Octavian had never been—and never would be—more in agreement than they were in this moment, on this one point: *We are not going to get along.*

Led by Kuro, Octavian stepped into the outer quarters.

“The prince resides on the south side of the third floor,” Kuro explained as they climbed the stairs. “The older princes use the other sections. Don’t get close—that could get annoying.”

Annoying...? Octavian nearly faltered at Kuro’s overly candid remark. Apparently, the butler had not sworn his loyalty to the royal family itself, but only to the youngest prince.

Once they reached the third floor, Kuro gave a rundown of the room arrangements. Octavian had his own room. It came furnished, and he could bring in anything else he wanted. Then, Kuro described the defensive formation

for incoming attacks, but Octavian missed the opportunity to get a word in since Kuro's transition between topics was so smooth.

"This is the prince's room." The butler knocked at the door, opened it, and closed it without entering. He let out a huge sigh.

"What's wrong...?" Octavian asked.

"A little dizzy..." Kuro muttered and let out another long sigh before placing his hand on the doorknob. Before turning it, he turned to Octavian again. "There's no turning back," he reminded Octavian, who didn't know why the butler said so but nodded anyway. Then, he and the butler entered the room of the prince and Octavian's soon-to-be master.

Herscherik was incredibly tired that day. He'd found suspicious documents through his investigative journalism; the night had worn on as he searched for and copied papers in various departments. Before he knew it, it was past midnight. Kuro had finally shoved him into bed, but he couldn't get this particular paper out of his mind. He sneaked it into bed with him and lit a magical light with the pocket watch, staying up further into the night. Ryoko had always been great at falling asleep but miserable at waking up. Herscherik, in turn, ended up sitting upright on his bed, Kuro nagging at him. *Who are you, my mom?* Just as Herscherik thought that, Kuro seemed to read his mind as the butler's fist dug into Herscherik's head, causing him to let out a yelp.

Herscherik had no tutoring scheduled for that afternoon in anticipation of his knight of service's arrival. He had continued his research from the previous night in his room. He had only recently moved to the outer quarters. He had been living in what used to be his mother's room in the royal quarters, but that was becoming a little too small. Ordinarily, all princes or princesses spent their younger years in the royal quarters and didn't move into the outer or garden quarters until a year before they joined the academy, when they turned seven. However, besides the fact that his mother had already passed away, Herscherik was in need of a room for the butler of service he'd acquired at an unusually young age—not to mention he needed his own space in order to further his plans. After pleading with his father, he had acquired his own room in the outer quarters.

His office was filled to the brim with the collection of papers, so Herscherik had turned to working in the living room for the time being. Papers were stacked high on the table by the window, and he was reading a stack of papers on the couch. The contents of said papers varied widely. Using Ryoko's certified calculation skills, Herscherik had calculated income and spending, comparing invoices with more solid evidence. While some of the papers in the room were copied by hand, others had been copied using a magical item similar to a modern scanner. It was a convenient tool that allowed the user to copy text or images from one piece of paper by pouring magic into the artifact, and then print out a copy by pouring magic in again. The downside was that the item could only hold one piece at a time, and it also had a limited usage. Moreover, with no Magic Within, Herscherik couldn't use it at all. But while the tool was a little inconvenient, it was a huge improvement compared to memorizing something or copying it by hand—to Ryoko, it really seemed like a sci-fi gadget produced from the pocket of a certain blue cat robot. Naturally, gathering paper trails had become much more efficient.

Herscherik spent the morning buried in his mountain of papers. When Kuro had finished his lunch and left to pick up the knight of service, Herscherik was left alone in his room.

"It's cold..." Herscherik muttered, shivering. He still couldn't get used to the over-powered cooling system. Compared to the air conditioning his previous life, these couldn't be tweaked. If Herscherik put on a jacket, he'd overheat and start to sweat. "For just a quick moment... It's important to refresh the air in a room," he told himself and opened the window.

Herscherik had made three mistakes. First, he left the window open. Second, he didn't use any paper weights. Third, he was overcome by drowsiness, spurred on by a filling lunch, and fell straight into a nap.

"Hersch!" A shout jolted Herscherik awake.

He woke up and found the visibly angry Kuro and the dumbfounded Octavian, his knight of service as of today, standing across a room piled high with papers in disarray. *That's the handy work of a gust through the window... Great.* Herscherik silently muttered to himself. Meanwhile, Kuro was glaring at him, evoking a feeling of *déjà vu*.

“How many times do I have to tell you!?” Kuro shouted.

“I’m sorry...” Herscherik sat up straight on the couch. This was giving him another serious feeling of déjà vu, but Herscherik kept his mouth shut. He had already learned the hard way that talking back to Kuro when he was in full nag mode was as fruitless as single-handedly trying to stop a speeding truck. It was anyone’s guess as to why Herscherik couldn’t apply this lesson to practice.

“We’ll talk about this later. First, we clean this up. You too, delinquent knight.”

“All right...” Octavian answered with exasperation and reached for some papers on the floor. As he gathered the papers, Octavian watched the image of the prince he had built up crumble to the ground. His butler scolded him without hesitation, and the prince simply accepted it. Octavian wondered how this total upheaval of social expectations seemed so natural when it came to them. Octavian decided to focus on rounding up the scattered papers, but he began to notice that none of them were things that a five-year-old should have been reading, which further accelerated his confusion. Octavian gave the prince a glance. Coincidentally their eyes met.

Herscherik realized that. “I’m sorry...” he said with an apologetic grin.

Octavian couldn’t help but let out a chuckle in response. At this point, the animosity Octavian felt for the royal family had already dissipated into the wind, even though it would take him some time to realize that. For now, he simply felt like the prince before him now was completely different from the one he had imagined.

The next day, Octavian found himself in the outer quarters again. He wasn’t dressed like someone headed to a midnight masquerade, but practically in street clothes. His outfit could have belonged to a young commoner—a simple white shirt, pants, and his trusty boots. His hair, the color of a golden sunset, was simply tied off at his neck. His old sword rested at his waist.

On his way to Herscherik’s room, Octavian’s outfit drew dirty looks from the gatekeeper, but he remained silent, unable to say anything to the prince’s own knight of service. *Take it up with the prince...* Octavian grumbled internally,

recalling the day before as he passed by.

The previous day, once they cleaned up the scattered papers, Herscherik had settled onto the couch and introduced himself to his new employee. “I’m Herscherik, the Seventh Prince. I’m looking forward to working with you,” he said with a smile. Then, he turned to Kuro behind him. “This is my butler, Schwarz. I call him Kuro, though.”

“Kuro...?” Octavian muttered. *Kuro the dog?* Octavian let out a guffaw, testing out his new insult in his head.

“Shut up.” Kuro glared at Octavian sharply enough to cut him.

“Don’t fight, Kuro.” Herscherik reprimanded.

“Don’t be a sore loser.” Kuro pouted. Octavian couldn’t help but be a little taken aback by Kuro’s blatant and exclusive straightforwardness around Herscherik.

“Now...” Herscherik sat up, ready to address his knight of service. “Mister Otakuvian.”

“It’s Octavian, Prince Herscherik.” Octavian’s brows twisted together. He corrected the prince, wondering why such a subtle mistake in pronouncing his name bothered him so much. “Please call me Oct.”

“Then call me Hersch. No need for ‘Your Highness’ or ‘Prince’ if we’re not in public.” He gave a beaming smile.

While he didn’t show it outwardly, Octavian was secretly shocked. What member of royalty would recommend his subjects address him with what could very well be a *criminal* lack of respect? *Well, I’m talking to him.* Octavian kept staring incredulously at Herscherik.

Unbothered, the prince continued. “Now, then, Mister Otaku.”

“Oct,” Octavian immediately interjected. “And no need for honorifics.”

Herscherik apologetically averted his gaze. “Ooh... Otakuvian the Combat Otaku was such a hit that I can’t get over it...” he muttered.

“Pardon? Is something the matter?” Octavian asked, having not heard the prince’s mutterings.

The prince hurriedly shook his head. “Nothing! Um... *Oct*. You can drop the formal tone if we’re in private, too. It’s annoying.”

Annoying...? Octavian couldn’t believe it. He had recalled the butler saying something similar, too. Gazing out into the distance, Octavian could almost understand it. Perhaps it was natural that this butler would serve this master, or perhaps that this master would hire this butler.

“And...” His master’s concerned tone brought Octavian back from his wandering thoughts. Herscherik looked him over from head to toe. “Hmm...” he pondered. “You can be in your street clothes unless we’re in public. This getup suits you very well, but...”

Octavian sensed that Herscherik was considering making the same point as his butler. Herscherik’s eyes spoke volumes that his words failed to convey.

And so, Octavian had arrived at the castle the following day in street clothes that caused the gatekeeper to silently reprimand him. He then entered the outer quarters and onto the third floor of the northern section where Herscherik’s room was. On the way, he passed by a man (whom Octavian would later learn was Herscherik’s language arts tutor) and gave him a polite nod.

Once he’d arrived at Herscherik’s door, he knocked and entered to be greeted by Herscherik. His room was completely cleared out, as if yesterday’s paperwork avalanche had never occurred.

“Good morning, Otaku.”

“Good morning, Prince,” Octavian answered informally as he’d been instructed. “You’re saying it wrong again.”

The prince was unbothered by the correction and informality, but simply apologized and moved on. “As for today’s agenda... Well, we don’t really have one,” he confessed. He was scheduled to study language arts, but his class had just been canceled by his teacher in response to an urgent matter.

A day of babysitting, then...? Octavian dreaded the thought. His duty was to protect Herscherik, but that didn’t mean he was by the prince’s side 24 hours a day. With permission, he was allowed to train with the soldiers or knights when Herscherik was in class. He had planned to try joining the knights’ training first

thing today, but that plan had been ruined.

“So, we have the day off. Why don’t we head out into the castle town?” Herscherik proposed to the visibly disappointed Octavian.

“You think you can get that approved on such a short notice?” the knight asked.

Unless they were going to routine locations like the academy, any member of the royal family usually had to declare their intentions any time they wanted to leave the castle. After submitting their plan, they had to meet with the constabulary to decide on the date and protocol they would follow. When Octavian had gone to see the members of the constabulary the previous day, he was told that the process would normally take over a week in all.

“Don’t worry about it.” Herscherik simply cracked a grin.

Ten minutes later, Octavian gazed upon the castle town before him with loathing. *How does a prince, a five-year-old no less, know about a secret passage like that...?* At Herscherik’s lead, they had come through a dilapidated waterway hidden in the shade of a tree placed at one end of the courtyard. By popping the metal bars off and creeping through the waterway, they had arrived at the castle town.

Herscherik, now in his son-of-a-noble disguise, called to Octavian, who was at a loss for words. “Make sure to call me Ryoko while we’re in town. As for you, Otaku—”

“Oct.” Octavian gave Herscherik a look, now convinced that the prince had just learned his name as “Otaku.”

Noticing Octavian’s disdainful glare, Herscherik let out a chuckle. “Sorry, I got it stuck in my head like that right off the bat...” the prince said, thoughtfully. It was going to be difficult to change the nickname that had already stuck in his mind. After some moments, Herscherik clapped his hands in revelation. “Can I nickname you something else?” He began thinking of potential names without waiting for Octavian to agree. “Daidai... To... Orange... Urm, I can do better.” Herscherik kept staring at the dumbfounded Octavian and then slapped his hand with a spark of inspiration in his eyes. “Oránge! I’ll call you Oránge, Oran for short!” Herscherik nonchalantly declared, as Octavian widened his eyes.

Names bestowed by people of important birth signified their unwavering trust. No ordinary member of royalty would have given someone a name after knowing them for only three days. While Octavian thought about turning down the nickname for a moment, he immediately realized that he didn't actually object to his new name. In fact, it was more of a pain to keep correcting the prince about it. "Why...?" He asked, without refusal, but just about the unfamiliar word.

Herscherik smiled, feeling a little bit of déjà vu. "It's like the color of your hair. Would you call it... sunset-colored? It's beautiful."

Octavian squinted his eyes at Herscherik's remark. Those were the same words as *hers*. "Your hair is so pretty. Like the sunset," she'd said. Her smile within his memory overlapped with Herscherik's smile before him. Octavian was forced to recall a past he wanted to forget. While the memories had only ever caused him pain and regret, the words that Herscherik had woven were somehow warm and pleasant.

Chapter Three: Ryoko, Oran, and the Castle Town Excursion

Octavian—or as Herscherik forcibly named him, Oránge, or Oran for short—looked at the prince leading their way through castle town with disbelief.

“Long time no see, little Ryoko! Why don’t you stay a while?”

“I’ll come back later!” Herscherik waved to the lady at the general store.

“We got good cuts, Ryoko. Give this a taste!”

“Oh, thank you!” He took the fried chicken from the butcher.

“Where’s your man in black, Ryoko? I keep asking him to come by, but... Ooh, who’s *that* handsome fellow! Won’t you introduce me?”

“No cheating, remember. Your boyfriend’s going to be upset again,” Herscherik said to the pretty woman eyeing Oran.

Oran couldn’t believe how familiar Herscherik was with everyone in town. Meanwhile, Herscherik (aka Ryoko) simply took a bite out of the fried chicken in his hand as he snaked through the crowd. It was rich and juicy, the flavorful oil hitting his tongue as he bit down on the savory meat in his mouth. The simple seasoning of salt and pepper really let the meat itself shine.

What I would do for a cold glass of beer! Herscherik imagined the beverage, gulping audibly. Herscherik was a 35-year-old spinster on the inside, after all. When she was too lazy to cook, Ryoko would gladly make dinner out of some leftover yakitori and premade dishes from the supermarket, with beer to wash it down. Her parents would have been shocked by her lack of affinity for the kitchen. The fact that such laziness was reserved for the single life contributed to Ryoko’s decision never to get married.

As Herscherik gleefully dug into the fried chicken, Oran timidly asked, “Do you come here often, Prince—?”

“I told you to call me Ryoko, Oran.” Herscherik turned back and glared up at

Oran, shoving the last bite of chicken into his mouth. Then he spotted the untouched chicken in Oran's hand and frowned. "Aren't you going to eat that,? It'd be a waste to let it get cold."

After a few moments of hesitation, Oran chomped on the fried meat. The simply seasoned tidbit was straightforward and delicious. While Herscherik had to take several bites to finish his piece, Oran finished his in the blink of an eye.

Seeing that Oran had finished his food, Herscherik turned back toward the crowd and kept walking. "As to your question...I don't come here every day, but I've been sneaking out whenever I can for about a year now. Kuro's been coming with me recently, but he's often busy with his other duties... He really doesn't like it when I leave on my own." Herscherik sighed and glanced back. "But I'm free and clear as long you're with me, Oran. Thanks!" He giggled in glee. "You're a huge help, really."

Oran frowned in response. *A year ago...? Since he was four?* As far as he could tell, the butler had only recently started accompanying Herscherik, and he had been out on the streets alone before that. It also seemed like the people of the castle town weren't privy to Herscherik's identity, but they had grown to know him pretty well.

Herscherik had been going out into the castle town even though Kuro was unavailable to accompany him. Each time, Kuro had found him, brought him back, and given him an earful. Of course, it went in one ear and out the other, as he would just sneak right out again without remorse. He was overjoyed that Oran's presence allowed him to go out as much as he wanted without being scolded by Kuro. Said butler of service, who had taken on a somewhat maternal role with Herscherik, was away on a reconnaissance mission at Herscherik's request. Naturally, the prince had not told Kuro anything about this day's excursion.

"Are you familiar with the area, Oran?"

"I come down here on occasion, but..." Oran shrugged. He and his classmates had partied out in the castle town a few times, but the locals had only watched the group of academy students from afar, seeing as they were all nobles. The only ones who dared to approach them were shopkeepers or restaurant owners

hoping to lure in their business. They had never been called over for a friendly chat or social visit like Herscherik.

“Okay... Then I’ll show you around today!” Herscherik took Oran’s hand and started walking enthusiastically. To outside observers, they might have looked like a small boy pulling his much older and reluctant brother by the hand.

Herscherik’s sightseeing tour of the castle town was very specific.

“The skewers there are delicious.”

“The fish there is fresh and reasonable.”

“Those weapons are expensive but the best in town.”

“A lot of shady people hang out in that alleyway, so you should stay away.”

“The lady at the flower shop is really pretty, but she has a boyfriend...” etc., etc.

Herscherik showed off every scrap of knowledge he had, from great shopping deals to hidden sights and even local gossip. “And that street over there... I don’t need to go down there, but maybe you or Kuro...” Herscherik whispered, pointing out a shortcut to the red-light district. There was no acceptable reason for a five-year-old to know this particular tip.

I’m going to clock whatever idiot told that to a kid, Oran swore a solemn oath to himself, in reaction to Herscherik’s misguided goodwill.

The final stop of the tour was Herscherik’s favorite fruit stand. As they were in season for the summer, the stands were filled to the brim with citrus.

“Hi, Miss Louise! I’ve come to play!” Herscherik called into the store. As a giant man loomed from behind a stack of fruit boxes, Oran reflexively reached for his sword. The man who appeared was as large as a bear, with bulging muscles and the stony expression of a cold-blooded killer. Ten out of ten knights would have immediately been on guard upon seeing him with a hand on the hilt of his sword.

“It’s written all over your face, Oran,” Herscherik grumbled and kicked Oran’s shin when the knight couldn’t seem to look away from the man at the fruit stand. While the kick was swift and accurately struck the weak point on Oran’s

shin, he was able to save himself from the embarrassment of crying out in pain by holding his leg and crouching down to the ground. “Don’t insult him,” Herscherik reprimanded with his hands on his hips. The man at the fruit stand watched these interactions unfold with a concerned look on his face, even though that face might resemble a hardened criminal’s.

“Oh, Ryoko. Welcome! It’s been a while. You’re not with your man in black, today, huh? Who’s this?” A cheerful voice broke through the stalemate as a curvy woman with a healthy, tanned complexion appeared from behind her husband.

“I’m sorry it’s been so long, Miss Louise.” Herscherik smiled, turning away from Oran crouching beside him. “This is Oran. My father just assigned him to me. Papa was worried, as always, that I’m getting into trouble...”

“Oh, my. You can’t blame your father for worrying about you, Ryoko. You’re cuter than most girls around here.”

“Still a boy...” Herscherik frowned in discontent. Even that disgruntled look was adorable enough that Louise had to hold back a charmed laugh.

Oran was listening in on the conversation, having recovered from the blow. He noticed that Herscherik was not lying outright, only omitting some facts.

“Are you going to help us out, today?” Louis asked.

“Of course! You can tell Oran to do anything you want, too!” Herscherik generously offered up his knight without his permission.

As Oran helped Louise’s husband carry merchandise and deliver orders, he couldn’t help but be impressed all over again. Herscherik’s customer service was so on point that he couldn’t imagine where the prince had acquired such skills. Anyone who recognized Herscherik stopped to talk to him since they hadn’t seen him in a while, and even new customers were drawn to the fruit stand by his adorable looks and pleasant demeanor. As he indulged in small talk, Herscherik kept the line of customers moving, on top of adding up totals and calculating change.

As Herscherik kept selling throughout the day, half of the stand’s merchandise was gone by the time they took a lunch break.

“Everything just flies off the shelf when you’re here, Ryoko,” Louise cheered. Herscherik giggled in embarrassment, fanning his face with his hand. The scorching, early-summer sun made Herscherik’s body temperature rise precipitously. As someone who spent most of his life in an air-conditioned room (even though he complained about that too), working an outdoor fruit stand was quite the laborious task. “Why don’t you have this and take a break? Oran’s resting now, too.” Louise presented him with a juicy, grapefruit-like citrus fruit. Its thick peel had already been removed, revealing its plump interior.

Herscherik gladly took the fruit and went to the back of the stand to find Oran seated there with his head hung low. Apparently, Louise’s husband had put him to good use. “Are you okay, Oran?” Herscherik asked as he sat next to him, taking a section of fruit. While the knight was clearly *not* okay, Herscherik felt obligated as his boss to ask.

“Do you always do this... Prince?”

“It’s ‘Ryoko,’ remember...? I guess no one can hear us now, though.” He chuckled at Oran’s stubborn refusal to address him as anything but a prince. “I don’t do any heavy lifting. Not that I could even if I tried.”

Herscherik observed their surroundings, taking another piece of fruit. A tangy sensation exploded in his mouth, the juice even quenching his thirst. *Their fruit is just the best*, he thought. *Too bad we don’t buy these for the castle*. Since the castle always bought from a contracted company, there was no room for anything from a different source. Any food eaten by royalty, in particular, had strict standards for its seller, source, breed, and quality. Naturally, fruits in the castle were much more expensive than the ones sold at this fruit stand.

Herscherik personally only cared to judge food by its taste—but alas, he was a member of the royal family, the very top of the social pyramid. In addition to food, everything from their clothes, accessories, furniture, and even down to their pens and ink were all top-shelf quality. With that kind of standard, only a few vendors in the nation could meet that demand. That situation came with its own problems, though. *Kickbacks on this and bribes on that...* Herscherik couldn’t help but let out a sigh. The more he investigated, the more corruption he discovered. He rubbed his temples as if he had a headache.

Oran shook his head. “I meant if you always come down to the castle town.”

“Oh. Not *always*. I have classes, for example. Just when I have the time.”

“May I ask why?”

Herscherik crooked his neck. *Why did I come out to town...?* It was true that venturing out here was the most efficient way to supplement his investigations in the castle and verify what he’d found. *But at first...* “Because no one in the castle actually *taught* me anything.” Herscherik nodded. That sounded about right.

Now it was Oran’s turn to cock his head in confusion. He knew that, as a prince, Herscherik received education from top tutors in the country. In fact, they had only headed out today because one of his classes was canceled.

Seeing the question written on the knight’s face, Herscherik let out a chuckle and picked up a fruit from a box beside him. “They teach me about important people in history, but not how much this fruit costs.” This piece of fruit was ripe with the time, care, and hard work of Louise and her husband. They’d raised these fruits like their own children. “They don’t teach me how much time and money it takes to grow it, how much it’s sold for, how much that sale is taxed, or how much profit it brings the seller. Or how much profit it *needs* to bring in so that the seller can make a living.” He didn’t expect his tutors to answer any of those questions. Everything that happened in this humble castle town was trivial to them. “I want to know the reality of this country. The reality of the people who live in it. Books can teach me about the past, but almost nothing about the present.”

Herscherik remembered how Ryoko had, at one time, praised the knowledge she read in books above all else and believed everything she read online. She never thought for herself or ever doubted the truth in the information she took in. Reality, however, was more complicated than some lines of text. Knowledge could aid in decision making, but she had learned the importance of judging what was right for herself. So, Herscherik had decided to visit the town, pushing aside his preconceptions, in his hunger for knowledge. He came to the town so he could be confident in doing the right thing when the time came. Herscherik was proud of that decision.

Oran stared at Herscherik. He couldn't believe that those eyes, staring pensively into the distance, belonged to a five-year-old. "Prince—" Just as Oran opened his mouth, a piercing female scream rang out, followed by multiple voices shouting. One of the voices demanded someone to go call a constable. "What was that?" Oran rose to his feet, turning toward the source of the scream. He sensed more tension than there should have been in this peaceful town and instinctively reached for the hilt of his sword. He then turned to find that Herscherik had vanished.

"Ryoko! Don't go!" Louise shouted from the fruit stand.

In disbelief, Oran ran out front to see a head of blond hair cutting through the crowd straight toward the center of the commotion. "You're kidding me!" *Why is the prince leading the charge?!* Groaning that Herscherik kept decimating his preconceptions about a five-year-old prince, Oran ran after him.

Oblivious to Oran's panic, Herscherik parted through the ground and arrived at the scene. There, he found a young woman being tightly held by a well-dressed man who appeared to be a noble. In the man's hand was a longsword, which he swung to and fro to keep back the crowd. The men of the castle town, who had the scene surrounded, were paralyzed by the man's deranged behavior. Their grips tightened on their weapons, which ranged from simple lumber to pitchforks. One of them, most likely a mercenary, was holding a sword. Each time they even tried to take a step toward the man, he screeched and thrashed his sword about.

"Money! Give me your money!"

"Please! Help!"

The scene intensified as the man growled and the woman screamed for help. The man was clearly out of his mind, with bloodshot eyes and emaciated cheeks. He was frothing at the mouth, and his every step was faltering. Even as he held onto the woman tightly, he was almost leaning into her like a walking stick.

"I need that drug! Bring it now!" the man howled, swinging his longsword in the air, which only struck the empty space between him and the crowd.

"Where's that constable!?" a man yelled from behind Herscherik.

“Someone just left to get one!” another answered.

Keeping his eyes on the deranged man, Herscherik eavesdropped on the conversations around him.

“Drug? The one that all the nobles are pushing nowadays?! Didn’t think anyone was stupid enough to actually try it!”

“Bet *this* idiot thought it was an aphrodisiac!”

Drug? As Herscherik focused on the neighboring conversations, he was pulled back by his shoulder.

“Don’t run off alone!”

“Oran!” Herscherik grasped Oran’s hand on his shoulder and pointed to the commotion, where the man was still slashing his sword about and using the woman as a shield. “We have to help her! Can you do something?!”

Oran gave the scene a quick glance. The madman with a longsword keeping the woman in a tight grip, surrounded by well-built men holding weapons. “She’s in danger,” he muttered, in agreement with the townsmen. The deranged man was keeping his hostage too close for any of them to recklessly attack. “If that guy would show even the slightest opening—”

“Okay,” Herscherik interjected. Before Oran could ask the prince what he meant, he slipped out of the crowd. Herscherik stood before the deranged noble, placed a hand on his chest, and gave a beaming smile. “Good day, sir. A wonderful afternoon we’re having, isn’t it?” The man, along with everyone surrounding him, was struck utterly speechless at this completely out-of-place greeting. Some in the crowd seemed to recognize Herscherik and called out “Ryoko!” but the prince maintained his smile and eye contact with the deranged man. “Nice to meet you, sir. My name’s Ryoko. What’s yours? How old are you? What do you do for a living?” Herscherik rapidly fired these questions without giving the man enough time to answer. Before he could get a word in edgewise, Herscherik rattled on about the season, the price of groceries, and even went on about someone’s dog.

“Shut up, you brat!” The man finally interrupted the polite barrage with audible irritation. He began to swing his longsword to and fro. Although a sharp

whish rang through the street, the sword had only cut through the plentiful space between him and Herscherik. Still, it drew screams from his hostage and the people in the crowd. The adults looking on went pale.

Even so, Herscherik maintained the same smile while he silently grumbled. *I wish you would have left your jaw on the floor for a little longer. You can't always get what you want, I guess.* He looked around through the area to find that Oran was skulking into the man's blind spot. Herscherik was reassured that he had made the right decision to appoint Oran as his knight, after seeing how he jumped into action without even a word from Herscherik. However, Oran still wasn't ready. In order to buy more time and to keep the man's attention on him, Herscherik implemented his next tactic.

"Sir, as you might have noticed, my father's a noble. I'm richer than that lady, and easier to carry. So..." Herscherik innocently cocked his head.

The crowd was astonished. No one had expected him to offer himself up in exchange for the woman.

The deranged man considered the boy's offer for just a moment. It would be easier for him to take a child hostage than an adult, and he could expect more ransom money for someone of noble birth. Judging by Herscherik's well-made clothes and refined mannerisms, the man pinned him to be the son of a respectable family. As deranged as was, even he could see that much. On the other hand, the fact that his thoughts couldn't calculate his inevitable arrest and imprisonment for this just proved the depth of his madness.

"Come here!" the man demanded.

Herscherik obediently approached him, although at a snail's pace. The man stood there frustrated by Herscherik's slow walk, and once he was close enough, he shoved the woman he had been holding hostage aside and reached for the child before him. In that instant, Oran leaped between them. As the knight dove in from the man's blind spot, he might as well have teleported there. Before the man could understand what was happening, Oran drew the sword from his belt and bashed away the man's longsword, knocking it high into the air. The man, who watched his sword fly into the sky, was blown back by Oran's roundhouse kick. He collapsed in front of the crowd, groaning in pain.

“Arrest him!” Oran called, and the dumbfounded men who had been surrounding the scene rushed into action. Just as the deranged man was completely pinned down, Oran caught the longsword as it fell from the sky. He had had no choice but to fling the sword upward, since he wanted to avoid the risk of hurting anyone in the crowd.

“Dammit! Dammit!” The man snapped out of his trance and began to struggle, before the townsmen bound him with rope and gagged him with a piece of cloth.

Seeing that the man had finally fallen silent, Oran turned to Herscherik.

“Thank you, Ora-*ngh*!?” A fist struck down onto Herscherik’s head, just as he was going to thank his knight of service. Herscherik groaned at the surprise attack and crouched on the spot, holding his head with his hands.

“What do you think you’re doing, putting yourself in danger like that?!”

“But...” Herscherik gazed up at Oran, ready to protest. When he saw Oran’s blue eyes lit with genuine concern, though, he had to rescind any excuse he had prepared. “I’m sorry.”

Oran let out a big sigh. “Good thing I got there in time...”

“Of course you did,” Herscherik said with confidence. “I believe in you, Oran.”

Oran nearly said something in response but was unable to follow through and closed his mouth.

After the incident, they handed the man’s longsword over to the townsmen and left the scene, lest Herscherik be discovered by any governmental representatives. They returned to the fruit stand and said their goodbyes to Louise and her husband before returning to the palace.

The sun, burning as brightly as Oran’s hair, illuminated the both of them.

“Hey, Oran.” Herscherik looked up at Oran beside him, who was in the middle of a full-fledged yawn. “You didn’t want to be a knight, right? I think you even dislike royalty.”

Oran halted in his tracks; his eyes widened. “Why would you say that...?”

“You gave those answers at the interview because you didn’t want to be

there. It's too obvious." Herscherik chuckled.

Oran didn't know how to feel now that Herscherik knew how he felt about the royal family and yet still could point it out with a gentle smile.

"Even your grades were just barely enough to graduate. No one would blame you for not trying out for the Knights' Order with grades like that. I could see in your eyes that you didn't like me. In fact, you were *mocking* me."

Even Oran's line about the proverb his whole household lived by was actually a rather sarcastic thing to say to a member of royalty. The royal family, perhaps with the exception of the king himself, ate on the taxpayers' dime. Herscherik in particular had already been appointed a butler and was now in search of a knight; neither of them were a necessity for the young prince, however. He couldn't blame Oran for thinking that he was wasting tax money.

"Then why'd you make me your knight of service...? Just because I beat your butler?" Oran asked, recalling what the prince had said during the tryout.

Herscherik answered without hesitating. "Well, beating Kuro was a prerequisite..." Then, he stopped and turned around. Since Oran had already stopped in his tracks, there was now a space between them that could fit two adults. "But I'll tell you the real reason when you truly decide to be my knight, Oran." Herscherik smiled and started walking again.

Oran followed along, not wanting the prince to get too far ahead of him. He almost called to Herscherik on several occasions, but instead he only opened and closed his mouth in silence, unable to articulate his thoughts.

"I'm home..." Oran returned to his own home two hours after accompanying Herscherik back to the castle. He had a good reason for this, though.

When they'd returned through the hidden passage from the castle town back to Herscherik's room, Oran had only opened the door and then closed it without entering. Feeling a sense of déjà vu, he asked Herscherik to open the door instead.

The prince gazed out into the distance. "Maybe we'll only be scolded half as long, since there are two of us..." With that optimistic projection, Herscherik

opened the door.

Inside the room was Kuro the butler, standing with his arms crossed and wearing a brilliant smile that would have made any woman swoon.

I never knew a smile could be so terrifying... Oran shuddered as he recalled Kuro's expression.

From the moment Oran entered the room with Herscherik, Kuro grilled him for what seemed like an eternity. Having gained detailed intel on the incident in the castle town somehow, Kuro began by scolding the prince for his reckless behavior. Then he switched to scolding Oran for not stopping the prince, and even launched into a rant about Herscherik's day-to-day routines and Oran's street clothes for the day. Kuro's scolding gradually veered off from its original topic, and he just kept droning on, as though using this opportunity to spill his guts on every grievance he'd ever felt.

Herscherik and Oran sat with straightened backs as Kuro scolded them, making them look like a pair of brothers whose mother had discovered their mischief.



“No good. Scolding *isn't* halved with two people. It's actually *doubled*. Bonus hour,” Herscherik mumbled.

Oran couldn't help but let out a guffaw, to which Kuro responded with a smile and a sharp, “Looks like you haven't learned your lesson yet.” Naturally, this only prolonged his scolding.

When they were finally released, Oran's legs had fallen asleep after sitting on them for so long. Even so, he dragged himself out of the castle and back to his home.

“You're back.” Roland, his father, was the first to greet Oran in the manner. “How did it go with Prince Herscherik?” he asked, concerned about his son for once.

Oran thought for a moment about the prince who blended right into the castle town and took initiative to discover the real world. The Seventh Prince had willingly risked his life to save a stranger and never showed any sign of anger as he was scolded by his subordinate, only apologizing and thanking him. Oran had always held a disdain for royalty since that fateful day—until he met Herscherik, whom he just couldn't bring himself to hate in that same way. Through it all, he couldn't help but see an unfathomable depth in the prince's green eyes that seemed to see straight through you.

“I don't know...” Oran couldn't muster any better answer. *I hate the royal family. But do I hate that little prince...?* Unsure of his own feelings, he sank deep into thought.

Roland gave up on actually getting an answer and shook his head. “I see. I heard there was some kind of commotion in the castle town today.” His remark startled Oran, but he kept a cool facade. “Apparently a blond noble child and an orange-haired swordsman arrested the man who caused the commotion. Do you know anything about it?”

“O-Oh yeah? Nah, haven't heard anything about it.”

What am I supposed to say? “Hey, that was me and the prince!?” Beads of sweat started to form on Oran's forehead.

His father merely shrugged and muttered, “The prince is just like him...” too quietly for Oran to hear. “Now finish your dinner. Everyone’s waiting to take your plate.”

“All right,” Oran muttered and turned away.

Just then, Roland called to his son, as if he was just reminded of something. “Oh— The man they arrested had a small amount of some kind of drug on him. His symptoms were very similar to *hers*, two years ago.”

Oran turned to his father, his eyes widening. Roland, however, said nothing and retired to his room without another word.

“What...?” Oran started walking with faltering steps out of the dining room and toward his own.

Once inside his room, he walked up to his desk without even turning on a light. The moonlight pouring in from the window shed just barely enough light for him to see. Then, Oran took up the wooden box from his desk. He gave the lid a few hesitant strokes and slowly opened it.

Inside the box was a silk ribbon. Under brighter light, the ribbon would have revealed its orange fabric and intricate embroidery of gold thread. It was a handmade work of art that had cost Oran most of his reward from a training mission, on top of the money he’d earned from selling the horn of an enraged magical beast, which had taken a lot of luck to acquire. The ribbon wasn’t flashy and actually appeared to be one solid color at first glance, but the golden thread shimmered in the light. The ribbon itself was the color of a sunset, just like his hair. It was the last gift he had planned to give his fiancée, but he never got the chance.

Oran took the ribbon in his hand. Then he stumbled backward until he tripped on his bed and plopped down onto it. “Drug...?” he muttered and pressed his fist against his forehead, still grasping the ribbon. Even as Oran remained still, his grip on the ribbon never loosened. He didn’t move a muscle until his worried younger sister came knocking at the door half an hour later.

The room was illuminated with just enough light. No one else occupied Herscherik’s room but the prince himself and his butler of service.

“...and that’s everything.”

“All right. Thank you, Kuro,” Herscherik said, having listened to Kuro’s entire report. He held the antique silver watch in his hand. It had become a habit of his to fidget with the watch whenever he was thinking especially deeply. It was a subconscious habit, but Kuro had no reason to point it out to Herscherik. His reports were kept strictly oral, never written down for fear of a third party discovering any notes. “And I heard in the castle town today that a particular drug is rampant among nobles. I know you’re tired, but could you look into that as soon as you can?”

“On it.” Kuro nodded. In the blink of an eye, he vanished into the darkness.

I do feel bad for Kuro... Herscherik quietly apologized as Kuro disappeared without any sound or complaint. Still, Kuro was his only confidant at the moment. He had no one else to ask. Herscherik swore that he would pay him back for his work, someday.

At that moment, Herscherik recalled what the townsmen had discussed earlier. The term “drug” was unmistakable, as well as the term “aphrodisiac.” Obviously, they weren’t talking about any kind of medicine. “Drug... Like some kind of narcotic?”

Herscherik sorted through Ryoko’s memories. From TV, she’d learned that narcotics could be a terrifying thing. The user felt a sense of relief and euphoria, but it was short-lived. Once they became addicted, there was no escape. People would burn through their life savings to obtain more and even resort to crime. Drug addicts easily slipped down to the bottom of the ladder they’d been climbing their whole lives. *Why don’t they buy games and comics with that money?* Ryoko sincerely wondered, as someone who’d spent her whole life cruising down Otaku Road. Games and comics, though, were just an example of something she enjoyed; ultimately, she just couldn’t understand why someone would spend a fortune just to ruin their life. At the end of the day, though, narcotics were something Ryoko had only heard about through a TV screen... something that had nothing to do with her.

Now this exact issue was lurking just around the corner. Illicit drugs held the power to not only ruin the life of an individual but to shake the very foundation

of a nation if left unchecked. That was something Herscherik had to prevent at all costs.

“Who’s behind this...? And why? Maybe you’d know, Count?” Herscherik couldn’t help but occasionally speak to Ruseria, who was surely by his side in spirit.

The prince gazed at the watch. Holding down the button, it popped open to reveal the portrait of Count Ruseria’s family of three. “Don’t worry. I’ll protect them,” Herscherik said, more to reassure himself than to renew his resolve. The prince then stood and put the watch back into his pocket before leaving his room.

Herscherik knew that he had to do everything he could, as little as that might be. He was ready to spend another night in the castle ruled by darkness.

Chapter Four: The Two Princes, Doubt, and Two Years

Gracis Kingdom had entered the blistering heat of midsummer. Not even the royal castle could escape the oppressive temperature, save for inside its air-conditioned rooms. The glaring sun threatened to overheat anyone who passed along its hallways and grounds. Herscherik, his butler, and his knight were all getting tired of the muggy weather as they headed to the training grounds.

“It’s hot... I want to eat something nice and cool.” Herscherik trotted along, slouching and dangling his arms in front of him, taking advantage of their privacy at the moment.

“After your training,” Kuro stipulated. “I’ll make you something then.”

Oran followed his master and the butler that spoiled his master rotten with mixed emotions.

At the moment, they were en route to Herscherik’s sword and riding lessons. Hearing Kuro’s response, Herscherik’s eyes began to glimmer.

On top of his ordinary butler duties, Kuro could handle anything from secretarial work to underground espionage—even cooking. In fact, he could cook anything from the kind of fast food one could buy on any street corner to extravagant dinners that, at least to Herscherik, tasted as good as the work of professional chefs. Kuro, however, always claimed that his dishes were not up to professional standards.

Herscherik’s favorites among all of Kuro’s concoctions were desserts. Kuro had a variety of recipes in his repertoire, from baked goods like cookies and cakes to frozen treats like gelatin molds and sorbet. Herscherik often attempted to find out where his butler had acquired such techniques, but the only answer he would give was that it was a skill he learned long ago.

He already has so many irresistible traits, and now he can cook, too...? Herscherik thought. *It’s unfair how skillful he is.*

The castle maids had cheered on Kuro during the tryouts for Herscherik's knight of service, but it seemed that his popularity had only grown since then. Despite all this, Kuro still showed no interest in women whatsoever, keeping them politely at a distance. Of course, he did his job perfectly, cooked masterfully, kept up a charming facade, and treated ladies with delicate respect no matter what. Herscherik couldn't help but gaze out into the distance whenever his butler seemed to be embodying the ideal man.

As the prince, however, Herscherik also saw another side of Kuro—while he was very talented and trustworthy, he was also a young man who always nagged him like a mother. He wondered if any of the ladies who worshipped Kuro would faint from shock if they discovered the truth.

Speaking of skill... Herscherik glanced back at the young man following him. Even as he looked exasperated by the exchange between his master and the butler, Oran followed them, dressed in the simple attire of a white shirt and pants.

Oran had already received a knight of service uniform tailored to him, but in accordance with his request for more mobility, he wore his street clothes outside of special events. Herscherik permitted it, in any case, since street clothes were better suited for sneaking out into the castle town. That being said, even Oran's clothes were still made of clean, quality material becoming of his nobility.

Noticing his master's glance, Oran cocked his head in curiosity, but Herscherik chuckled to muddy the waters and turned his gaze forward again. Oran's popularity among the women of the castle had also been growing rapidly since the tryouts. His modest but elegant sunset-colored hair and downturned sapphire eyes gave him an air of gentleness. He was, after all, an upper-class nobleman with a sweet face. Besides, while Oran appeared to be a scrawny young man at first glance, he was the only candidate in the tryout to best Kuro in a swordfight. What's more, he was the third son of the Marquis Aldis, who was dearly trusted by the previous king, and the descendant of a long line of generals and royal guards. Oran had it all—impeccable looks, skill, and a family name. To top it all off, his honest personality was immediately apparent after a single interaction. It would have been bizarre for such a man to *not* garner

popularity among the ladies.

Herscherik recently had Oran come watch his training, only to have the knight pat his head with a pitying look in his eyes. That turned out to be quite a hurtful response, since he always tried his hardest when training. The response felt familiar to Herscherik, too, and it wasn't mere déjà vu.

This world really isn't fair... He had been repeatedly reminded of that fact since he was three years old. He had no combat skills, athletic talent, magic, or even the kind of intelligence that would normally garner the admiration of others. He was often called beautiful, but even his looks seemed subpar when compared to his father and siblings. The only unique talent he possessed was the experiences and skills he had carried over from his previous life. While no one could have blamed Herscherik for feeling envious, he was well aware that nothing would come of wallowing in it. Because of Ryoko's life experience, Herscherik knew how to accept himself for who he was, including all of the ways he was different from those around him. As a woman in her thirties, dealing with negative emotions was a skill that Ryoko had acquired naturally.

Just then, Herscherik heard someone inhale sharply behind him. He stopped and turned around to find Oran as the source of the sound, staring down the hallway and looking like he had just bitten into a sour lemon. Herscherik followed his gaze—someone familiar was approaching them from down the hall. The prince easily recognized the young man from a distance, with his red hair that shone like melted rubies. The man recognized Herscherik in return and raised his hand in greeting as he stopped in front of the little prince.

"Herscherik," the man said, gently smiling as his polished-ruby eyes narrowed. His smile full of kindness strongly resembled that of Herscherik's father. It was only natural; he was another son of the king of Gracis and Herscherik's half brother. "It's been a while. Are you doing all right?"

"I am. I'm glad to see you're doing well, too, Brother Marx."

Herscherik's brother smiled even more brightly at this. His name was Marx Gracis, the oldest brother and the First Prince. In other words, he was next in line for the throne. While Marx was slightly shorter than Kuro or Oran, his body was toned and muscular. A simple gesture like the wave of a hand, or even just

his standing posture, was exquisitely elegant.

His princely aura is blinding... Herscherik only said that in his head, of course, but even though he knew it was impossible, he couldn't help but imagine shimmering stars around Marx and red roses blooming behind him. Herscherik always thought that if Marx had been a character in a shojo manga, his introduction panel would absolutely have to be decorated with a riot of rose blossoms. Even though Herscherik had gotten used to being around his father by now, he couldn't help but be secretly intimidated by the beauty of his siblings whenever they were nearby. He had been a woman of average appearance in his previous life, after all.

"Are you coming out of your training with the Knights' Order? How is work, Brother Marx?" Herscherik remembered that Marx had joined the Knight's Order under the military branch after he graduated the academy this year. Even royalty had to find useful employment once they were of age. Most of the time, they were able to go into the department of their choosing, and talented members of the royal family were often actively recruited. Herscherik had heard through the grapevine that Marx was talented in offensive fire spells but was also decent at sword fighting. Herscherik assumed that he'd chosen close ties with the military, considering his future as the king.

Since his brother had approached from the direction of the training grounds, Herscherik could easily guess that he had just come from a training session. Herscherik usually borrowed a section of the training grounds in between the knights' scheduled lessons.

"Yes, I just finished. I still have still much to learn, both in my training and in my work." Marx flashed a tired smile. Even that exhausted expression was picturesque.



“It must be tough,” Herscherik chimed in. He knew that everybody struggled with their first year on the job, no matter the career path.

I remember struggling through my first year, too... Herscherik reminisced about Ryoko’s time in the workforce. At first it had been quite the rollercoaster ride. Company policy dictated that new hires put in some time in their branch locations, but around when Ryoko had gotten the job, one of the office workers in their headquarters had suddenly resigned. Since Ryoko was the new hire who lived the closest, she was assigned to company headquarters. Before she could even get used to her desk, her predecessor left the company after giving her only the bare minimum of training, leaving behind a confusing handbook and an ever increasing pile of tasks. Any time she sought advice from an older member in the department, no one had any to offer except demanding that she figure it out on her own. Her first year in the company was literal hell. She’d ended up clocking in more overtime than any of the other new hires by far—something she only realized after someone in HR informed her of it a few years later with much pity in her voice.

Even after being reincarnated, Herscherik wanted to give his past self a pat on the back. *That first year helped me stick it out with that company for so long.* Ryoko had contemplated quitting on a few occasions during her career but had kept telling herself that her first year was probably worse than her current situation. What doesn’t kill you makes you stronger, after all. That being said, Herscherik felt like he would quit on that very first day if he had to do it all again. Recalling how hard it was for Ryoko, the equivalent of a commoner in modern-day Japan, Herscherik hesitated to even compare his struggles to those of Marx, the royal heir. Surely the First Prince faced a unique set of responsibilities, and he was expected to assist his father and attend to his royal duties on top of his occupation. His schedule was packed, to say the least. Herscherik couldn’t help but be impressed that the royal heir could simply dismiss it all with a chuckle.

“Is he your knight of service?” Marx’s words pulled Herscherik out of his thoughts.

While noting that his brother’s eyes had sharpened, Herscherik turned around. At an unnaturally far distance behind Kuro, who kept directly behind

Herscherik, Oran was staring into the air in such a way that he conveniently avoided Marx's gaze. Perplexed by Oran's uncharacteristic response, Herscherik turned back to his brother. "Yes, this is Ora—I mean, Octavian."

"I knew it... Octa!" Marx raised his voice, in contrast to his previous tone.

Herscherik jolted in shock. He'd had a few encounters with Marx before, but he had never heard his brother raise his voice like this before.

Marx walked right past the bewildered Herscherik with large strides and approached Oran. Now, he had dropped the demeanor of a prince and looked like any other young man his age, wearing his emotions on his sleeve. He came so close to Oran that he could nearly grab him by the collar.

"Why are you Herscherik's knight!?"

"It's been a long time... Prince Marx." Oran greeted him with a low monotone, in contrast to Marx's display of anger, and took a step back to rebuild some distance between them. Herscherik had never heard Oran speak like this before, either. "I'm happy to see you well," Oran added in the same, icy tone.

Marx's brows raised in anger. "What's with the formality? And you've always called me—" Marx lowered his voice, as if to calm an onslaught of emotions about to rain down on Oran. "You promised to be *my* knight. And now...!"

"A child's promise... It meant nothing, Your Highness." Oran raised his head from his bow, but his expression was devoid of all emotions.

"Don't call me 'Your Highness'!" Marx spat.

Oran stared at the First Prince with the same muted expression.

Marx looks just as handsome when he's angry. Herscherik's thoughts wandered off-topic, as he couldn't keep up with all this unexpected drama. Some might have called this habit escapism, but no one there would tell Herscherik that. *Oran's pretty good looking, too.* Together, they formed quite a picturesque tableau. *What's going on, anyway...?* Gradually pulling his mind back from la-la land, Herscherik began to assess the situation.

Judging by the conversation so far, Marx and Oran seemed to know each

other. Since they were about the same age, and since Oran mentioned knowing Marx when they were children, Herscherik wondered if they'd been classmates in the academy. In any case, they seemed to have been rather close at some point. *But how'd they end up like this?* Confused, Herscherik looked to his brother, his knight, and back again. Marx's ever-so-princely face was twisted in frustration. By contrast, Oran was completely expressionless and seemed barely affected by Marx's plea.

"I needed you..." Marx squeezed out this confession. He spoke softly, but his words came across like an agonized scream.

Herscherik felt like Marx truly *did* need Oran with him. As if to hammer in that impression, Marx rushed to cover his mouth with his hand after he let out that admission.

I get it! Realization struck Herscherik like a bolt of lightning as he watched Marx's face contort in sorrow. *I see it now!* Now fully caught up, Herscherik looked up at the pair. In this drama, he saw an opportunity to show what an understanding boss he could be.

"Um, Brother Marx! Oran!" he called to them, hesitantly. Seeing that the two had turned their attention to him, Herscherik mustered up the courage to say: "If you two have... *that* kind of relationship, I'll never stop you!" Kuro guffawed and the two young men froze as Herscherik rambled on. "I don't think there's anything wrong with two men loving each other... Anyone can love anyone, really..." Still, Herscherik's eyes slowly dropped to the ground, darting to and fro without focusing on anything. He twiddled his hands in front of his chest, tapping his index fingers together. *Marx must have been in love with Oran all these years. But he's the royal heir, and he couldn't very well marry Oran, so he wanted him as his knight of service to...* Herscherik nodded along with his internal monologue that was starting to resemble a runaway locomotive.

Ryoko had acquired a decent amount of knowledge in this particular department during her life. While she wasn't drawn to the genre herself, she had acquired more knowledge about it than the average citizen, thanks to one of her few otaku comrades. Said friend had a habit of seeing sparks fly left and right, imagining couples between real-life idols, actors, and even groups of men she passed on the street, on top of any fictional characters she liked. However,

she always kept a firm line between reality and her daydreaming, and she never forced anyone to share her inclinations. Ryoko would not have chosen to remain her friend otherwise.

Still, Ryoko could feel her friend's mindset creeping in whenever she found herself imagining one of the characters in her comics or video games as a "top" or "bottom." Of course, Ryoko never expressed those thoughts out loud.

Marx is prettier than most girls, and Oran is handsome... Just as Herscherik began to imagine which of them would most likely be on top, he violently shook the thought out of his head. While Ryoko was an old-maid otaku, she was no BL fanatic. That being said, she bore no disrespect for anyone who was. On the other hand, Ryoko was a *huge* fan of bromances—not that she ever expected anyone outside of her otaku circle to know the difference between the two genres. *Out of all possible situations, I never expected Marx to have unreciprocated feelings for Oran, whom I practically stole from him...*

At that moment, Herscherik realized that he was the "other man" in this situation. He understood full well that everyone had preferences of their own. Some people were only attracted to people of the same gender, some preferred partners a couple decades older or younger... There were as many preferences in this world as there were people. Excepting criminal behavior, of course, Herscherik never wanted to be the kind of person who discriminated against someone's character or preferences solely because of his own feelings.

"He is my knight, but everyone deserves a private life..." Herscherik scuttled behind Kuro and watched the pair. While Kuro was silently quivering with suppressed laughter, Herscherik was too busy keeping his mind on the scene before him.

"Huh!?" Oran shrieked. Marx practically turned to stone.

His cheeks slightly reddened, Herscherik turned his gaze away from them, as if he had just witnessed something he wasn't supposed to. "So, um. Brother Marx...? Go get him," he concluded, unsure of what to say, as he formed his tiny hand into a fist of encouragement. Kuro guffawed once more. If no one had been around, he would have started banging the walls with his palms in a fit of laughter.

“I think there’s been a misunderstanding, Your Highness!” Oran was the one who rushed to protest.

Marx, on the other hand, was still immobilized from his youngest brother’s assumption, which was so far off base that it was practically in the outfield.

“Don’t worry about me, really!” *Right*, Herscherik thought. *They can’t make it public.* Herscherik shrunk farther behind Kuro. Even though he knew that he shouldn’t act any different toward the two of them because of their sexuality, he couldn’t help but be a little taken aback.

“Why are you hiding!?” Oran demanded. “Seriously, what do you think is happening here, Prince!?”

As Oran tried to approach Herscherik, Kuro interrupted. “Prince Hersch, it’s almost time for your training.” As they’d wasted a good amount of time here, Herscherik no longer had any chance of making his training session on time.

“Oh, you’re right.” Herscherik popped out from Kuro’s shadow and bowed. “Excuse me, Brother Marx.” He began walking away as fast as he could.

As Kuro followed the prince, he gave Oran another glance and guffaw. It was blatantly obvious how much fun he was having.

“You black dog...!” *He’s enjoying this! Just because he’s not mixed up in it...!* Oran turned to follow them, in an attempt to resolve Herscherik’s misunderstanding that Oran hadn’t untangled, and frankly didn’t want to.

“Octa!” Marx bitterly called out, having finally unfrozen and rebooted his brain. “Is this still because... of what happened two years ago?” he implored. “Is that why you keep avoiding me?”

Oran didn’t answer, but left to follow after his master and the butler.

After finishing his unrewarding-as-usual swordsmanship training, Herscherik finally understood that Marx and Oran were *not* caught in a sordid love affair, thanks to the much-too-desperate clarification. Herscherik couldn’t help but still have his suspicions precisely *because* of how adamantly Oran denied the idea, but he decided that it would be too cruel to voice that.

Herscherik returned to his room to find Kuro's homemade jelly laid out for dessert. The translucently green jelly contained a piece of orange-like fruit within it. When Herscherik took a bite, the blend of refreshing mint and citrus exploded in his mouth, making him instantly forget about the summer heat.

"Mm! This is delicious! Where'd you learn to make something like this, Kuro? Seriously." With a mouth full of jelly and a beaming smile, Herscherik asked the same question he had always asked upon tasting one of Kuro's new specialties. But, as usual, Kuro only responded with a slight smile. Herscherik wondered if Kuro's mysterious nature contributed to his popularity among women, even as he kept shoving more jelly into his mouth.

Having inhaled his dessert in record time, Herscherik turned to Oran, who had been rather quiet for the past few minutes. Seated in his chair, he hadn't touched his jelly or the cup of tea before him, only staring out into the distance in silence. Herscherik had noticed that Oran seemed to zone out from time to time. His knight's habit had first become apparent the day after they ventured into the castle town on that fateful day in early summer. Herscherik sighed, seeing a shade of deep concern somewhere in Oran's expression. *I wanted to wait until he was ready to tell me what it was about, but at this rate...* Herscherik worried that tragedy could strike while Oran wasn't looking. Moreover, he was concerned for Oran's mental well-being. Bottling up emotions never did any good for anyone.

Herscherik made up his mind and shot Kuro a look. Seeing that Kuro saw the look and returned a shrug and a nod, Herscherik began.

"I have to apologize in advance, Oran."

"Prince...?" Oran gave a look of suspicion at the sudden apology. He simply couldn't figure out the intention behind the prince's statement.

"I looked up what happened two years ago."

"What!?" Widening his downturned eyes as far as they could go, Oran jumped out of his seat, knocking over his chair with a loud crash and gesturing wildly with his hand, turning over his cup of tea.

Kuro approached with a sigh and moved Oran's teacup and serving of jelly away before wiping the spilled tea from the table. Still, Oran stared Herscherik

down as if Kuro didn't exist. In fact, he was facing Herscherik's direction—but he wasn't looking at the prince. His field of vision had closed in, the memory of that fateful day replaying in his mind. He was looking at *her* once again.

“Why—!?”

“Oran, I need you to calm down first... Sit down, please.” Herscherik called to his knight, raising one hand.

His master's call didn't seem to reach him. “Why would you— That's a personal matter...!” Visibly shaken, Oran's lips quivered and tried to finish his sentence, all to no avail.

Seeing the blood draining from Oran's face, Herscherik let out a quiet sigh then clapped his hands together once. Seeing that Oran jolted in reaction to the clap, Herscherik called to him. “Oránge.” Herscherik stared straight into his eyes. “Calm down. Please, take a seat.” Despite the calm tone he employed, this was an unmistakable order. The room was permeated by an aura that prevented Oran from even *thinking* of defying the prince, let alone saying so out loud.

That's not it... Oran reconsidered. Herscherik was the one who took control of the room with a single clap and a calm order. Having regained his senses, Oran steadied his breathing and picked up the chair he had knocked over before sitting on it.

After Oran was seated, Herscherik let out a long sigh. The topic had been a deeply upsetting one, as expected, but it had already been breached. He knew he had to see it through. “I'm truly sorry for digging into your past without your permission,” Herscherik apologized again from his seat.

Having regained his level head, Oran now found himself flustered by this. Come to think of it, it was only natural for the prince to research the background of whomever he was hiring. Particularly because of Oran's troubled history at the academy, Herscherik really had no choice *but* to do so. And furthermore, Herscherik—a member of the royal family *and* Oran's boss—apologizing to *him* was quite unusual in and of itself.

Herscherik looked up at Oran. “At first, I was just curious,” he started, still apologetic. “Sorry, I'm a bit of a gossip... I thought your academy grades were

very suspicious.” All of a sudden, Oran’s grades had plummeted to barely passing, just as his behavior and attitude turned from model student to ultimate slacker, tarnishing his reputation among teachers and friends. Herscherik was convinced that Oran was acting that way on purpose. So, he had ordered Kuro to secretly look into Oran’s background, which yielded much more depressing results than Herscherik had expected. This information, however, perfectly explained Oran’s sudden change.

Initially, Herscherik never intended to share what he had learned... But that was no longer an option. “Do you remember what happened the first time the two of us went out into the castle town?” Herscherik asked, knowing that Oran remembered it perfectly. In fact, Oran had started to lose himself in thought after said incident. “You drew a connection between the incident and what happened two years ago, didn’t you?” Herscherik didn’t wait for an answer, but continued. “I could tell you what I’ve found out from Kuro about your past, but...”

Herscherik stared into Oran’s eyes, and the knight was taken aback. No one had ever looked at him like this before. “I want to hear about it from you, Oran,” Herscherik said. Seeing that Oran was hesitant, the prince continued. “I know it’s hard to rely on or even trust a little kid like me, but... I trust you, Oran. From the moment I decided that you would be my knight. And I want you to trust me, too...” Faintly, Herscherik added, “I never want to feel that way again.” Herscherik reflected on his words, reminded of a bitter event in the recent past. His nanny had left him the previous year, after committing a terrible crime because she could trust neither the king nor Prince Herscherik himself. Even now, Herscherik understood that the incident had been unavoidable. That being said, he didn’t intend to let it be repeated. The last thing he wanted was Oran to resort to the same course of action as his nanny had. “So—”

“All right,” Oran interrupted. He had more given up than he had actually decided to trust Herscherik. Truth be told, he was glad that the prince respected him enough to let him make the decision in the first place. “Two years ago... my fiancée died.”

Oran remembered a street painted red by the sunset, and the peaceful

expression on her face. She and Oran had been betrothed by their families, and she was the daughter of a particularly old and prosperous family who had nevertheless not been blessed with a male heir. The lord of her house had asked his friend, Oran's father, if one of his sons could marry into the family. Oran, the third son of the family, happened to be the same age as his daughter. And so, they were engaged, with the expectation that Oran would be welcomed into her family.

"At first, well, we were both embarrassed, so we butted heads a lot..." Their relationship started in their youth, with marriage looming on the horizon. As teenagers, they began to develop a real romantic relationship. There was never a time when Oran's childhood friend and fiancée wasn't at his side. His goal—his entire life—had become to protect her, and by extension to protect the country she lived in by becoming a knight.

"Marx—Prince Marx and I often tested each other's strength in the sword. He was my rival... and my friend. At the time, my goal was to become a royal guard or knight of service and climb my way up to becoming a general. If possible, I wanted to remain with His Highness as his friend." Just when it seemed like nothing could go wrong in Oran's life, everything changed on that fateful day with the burning sunset.

At the time, Oran was at the top of his class in the knight's curriculum, which was a testament to his enduring hard work. Unless he had other engagements, he always stayed late and trained. That day, as he was training by himself at the academy, a messenger on horseback arrived with news from his family: His fiancée was dead.

"I didn't understand...why she had to die."

Oran ran out of the academy straight to his fiancée's house; Marx might have spoken to him on the way, but Oran couldn't remember clearly.

When he arrived at his fiancée's house, she had passed away in her own bed, as if in a peaceful slumber. She had told Oran a few days ago that she would be taking leave from the academy for a short time. "It's the summer heat getting to me—don't worry," she had told him with a smile. Oran advised her to take care, gave her a tender kiss as if to cast a protective spell, and left.

That was the last time he saw her alive.

The very next day, he was planning to visit her with her favorite pastry and the handmade ribbon he had just picked up, but never again would she show him her smile or call his name. The hopelessness he'd felt on that day was still fresh in Oran's mind. Even though their marriage had been arranged by their families, and despite their youth, Oran unmistakably loved her.

After her death, things only grew worse for Oran. One page within his fiancée's diary, one of the keepsakes her father had given him after her death, contained an entry in her handwriting that Oran had never expected to read.

"She wrote how difficult it was to be with me."

For their future and for her sake, Oran had kept up his training and studies, always making sure that his academy grades were impeccable. Her diary entry explained how she felt too ordinary to have a future husband that was so exceptional.

"I never thought her ordinary..."

While she was unassertive, she was a kind and caring woman. She had been working on improving her homemaking skills the best she could, and she even volunteered at an orphanage. Watching her was what gave Oran the motivation to work hard, so that she might enjoy an easy life. In the end, though, he had only ended up putting more weight on her shoulders. On top of that, she had apparently been harassed by other ladies of nobility just for being his fiancée.

Women know how to bully other women in any world... Herscherik thought. Bullying between women was much more sinister than men imagined it to be, and it was typically kept hidden from the male gaze. Oran must not have realized that any bullying was going on at all. Moreover, Herscherik imagined that his fiancée wasn't the type who could talk about the cruelty she was suffering to Oran or her parents. Bullies always had an eye for easy prey.

"If that was all, I'd only have myself to blame. But there was another entry in her diary." On one spring day, she confessed in her diary that she had begun using a certain drug that was gaining popularity in the underground. This drug helped her forget her worries for a moment and eased her mind. She felt more confident and could think of things in a positive light. Once the drug ran out,

though, she was overcome with fear, anxiety, and unbearable guilt; she would lose control of her emotions and her tears. In order to escape that pain, she returned to the drug. When she ran out of drugs and money to buy them, she pawned her jewelry. The money went to more drugs for a temporary escape from her hardships. At the end of each cycle, she convinced herself that the next dose would be the last—to no avail.

This part of the entry was smudged with her tears. Just when she had run out of jewelry to pawn, a particular nobleman had discovered her secret and blackmailed her into breaking her engagement with Oran and marrying him instead. He threatened to divulge all of her secrets: the bullying, selling her family treasures, and finally the drugs.

“She couldn’t afford the drugs any more. Couldn’t talk to anyone. He had threatened to tell me everything unless she went to bed with him. Then... she died.” One of her household servants, concerned that she hadn’t left her room all morning, came knocking at her door—only to find Oran’s fiancée deep in eternal slumber on her own bed.

“If I hadn’t been so caught up in myself at the academy...” If only he had noticed her changes in behavior along the way, Oran thought, if only he could have been someone for her to lean on, she would still be alive. At the time, he had been too busy trying to live up to his own high expectations.

“She was essentially an invalid. A noble girl—can you believe it?” After reading her diary, Oran thought that her deterioration must have been the side effect of the illegal drug. “I’m responsible for her death and I will be judged for it. But... I understood then how dangerous that drug really was. I wanted to do something about it.”

Oran had immediately notified the constabulary. They had told him they would launch an investigation, and they eventually did, but it was short-lived. When he tried to track down the source of the drug on his own, Oran could only find rumors that it was being circulated in secret among the nobles. He also spoke to his father about the matter, but as a member of the Knights’ Order and the military, Roland couldn’t officially launch a domestic investigation on his own. As a last resort, Oran begged for Marx’s help, but nothing came of it. By that time, the drug was no longer in circulation.

“Ever since... I couldn’t find a reason to become a knight.” Oran grew to hate the government and royalty who’d turned their backs on their people, the nobles that tormented his fiancée, and most of all himself for failing the people he’d sworn to protect. He no longer felt the need to maintain his grades at the academy, and he certainly didn’t want to serve *royalty* after they’d failed to help him when he needed it most. He no longer saw any meaning in becoming a knight.

His fiancée’s cause of death was officially listed as illness. After that, Oran had been suspended a few times for reacting violently to his classmate’s careless insults to her honor. He knew now that all of this was only disguising the anger he felt toward himself. He’d planned to leave the country after graduating the academy, but his father had never permitted it, leading to his prolonged period of unemployment.

“It’s possible that drug from two years ago has resurfaced,” his father had recently told him. Although he was already retired, Roland used to serve in one of the most important posts in the country. One of his former subordinates who now worked in the constabulary had contacted him in secret with this harrowing information.

Both Herscherik and Kuro quietly listened to Oran until he finished his story. Once he did, awkward silence filled the room.

Herscherik took a deep breath. He had nearly forgotten to breathe from being too engrossed in Oran’s story. “Thank you for telling me all of that, Oran,” Herscherik began with gratitude. Then he bowed in apology once more. “You counted on my brother and the royal family for help, and we couldn’t do anything. I’m sorry.”

Herscherik had been only three at the time and had barely begun his studies. While it was true that he couldn’t have done anything to help Oran at the time, saying it out loud would only be an excuse. Instead, Herscherik continued, as Oran stared at the floor in silence.

“Your story backs up Kuro’s findings.” That was an important clue. “One of which is that the drug wasn’t in circulation for long.” It had only been around from spring to summer, two years ago. Usually, drugs were more profitable the

longer they remained popular. While the risk of discovery also grew, generating more addicts meant more repeating buyers. Increased demand while the supply remained steady would mean a higher profit margin, too.

“Another is that the drug was only available to a small percentage of the population, mostly nobles and the wealthy within the capital.” Kuro had found that most of the users were in the capital, actually, and almost exclusively among the upper class. The drug must have seen a very limited spread. “And it’s possible that someone high up is involved.” A noble woman had died of mysterious circumstances—it didn’t make sense that the investigation was practically brushed under the rug. That suggested the presence of pressure from above their ranks. Herscherik declared this all with confidence.

Oran finally looked up from the floor and straight at Herscherik. *Is he seriously five years old?*

From his story alone, Herscherik had noticed many things that Oran had not even considered at the time. Herscherik no longer seemed to him like the young prince he supposedly was.

“The key to getting to the bottom of this drug mystery must be somewhere in your fiancée’s circle.” Herscherik stood. “Kuro, look into everywhere she might have gone at the time, based on what Oran has told us. We may not find out who was responsible for it two years ago, but there has to be a connection to what’s going on now.”

“Got it,” Kuro answered.

“I’m going to sneak in to see if there’s any documents from the time. Any little thing could be a lead.” Herscherik produced his silver pocket watch and checked the time; it was still far away from nightfall.

“On your own again...?” Kuro asked.

“These castle grounds are practically my backyard,” his young master said, smiling. “I can get into anywhere I want with my eyes closed. Don’t worry.” Kuro responded with a begrudging frown.

“Why...?” Oran muttered. The government of Gracis was completely unconcerned with the matter, even after the death of one of its citizens. Two

years later, and this young prince was ready to take matters into his own hands.

Herscherik pinched his brows in protest. "A citizen of my country lost her life. The drug that might have caused it is coming back. You want me to stand and watch while more of my people might be killed? Have their lives ruined?" He spoke as if he was talking to a stubborn child.

"They're all people who have nothing to do with you, Prince."

"Nothing to do with me?" Herscherik repeated, with a touch of anger. "I am a prince of Gracis. They have *everything* to do with me. I have a duty to protect my people. What are you talking about?" he concluded.

Oran had no response. Herscherik had said all of that as if it was self-evident. Then, he was met with a sense of loss at how he had wasted these past two years. But he still had time, he realized. There were still things Oran could do to prevent anyone else from suffering the same fate as his fiancée. "Is there anything... I can do?"

"Of course." Herscherik smirked. "You're my knight, after all. We have a lot of work ahead of us."

Chapter Five: The Investigation, the Oracle, and the Clue

Herscherik had learned that, despite being reincarnated into another world, summer nights were just as muggy. That being said, since Herscherik was a prince—albeit the “runt” of the royal family—his room came equipped with very effective air conditioning. It was *so* effective, in fact, that he often found his office to be a little *too* breezy. Whenever he turned the air conditioning off, though, the room became instantly muggy. He really wanted to open the window to mitigate the temperature, but that had drawn the furious ire of his butler in the past. So, Herscherik reluctantly put on a coat and let out a sigh at the pile of papers in front of him.

I thought I had the right idea... Even though only two years had passed since the incident, Herscherik had found surprisingly few documents on it. *Someone high-up has their fingers in all this, no doubt about that.* He’d deduced that someone inside the castle powerful enough to destroy evidence had to be involved in the incident.

Heaving another sigh, Herscherik looked at Oran. He too was lost in the papers before him. Oran had prefaced this by saying that he wasn’t good with this kind of clerical work, but he was still facing down those papers and refusing to give up. Herscherik imagined that his desire to atone for what happened to his fiancée and to prevent anyone else from falling victim to the drug contributed to his enthusiasm. As he watched Oran hard at work, Herscherik produced the silver pocket watch and checked the time. It was already past eight o’clock in the evening.

“Will you be going home tonight, Oran?” Herscherik asked.

Oran was only contracted to work during the day and so far had always left by six o’clock each day. While the matter at hand was quite urgent, overworking wouldn’t do them any good. Working too hard meant not working smart. As someone who had worked in modern-day Japan in a previous life, Herscherik

never wanted to force Oran to work overtime. It was ingrained into his mind that people should work no more than eight hours a day with an hour break, five days a week. Of course, Ryoko's work had not always been as easy as that, but Herscherik wasn't about to force one of his own men to work off the clock.

On the other hand, Herscherik's own life had lately been jam-packed with his studies and training, as well as document collection and verification and, of course, his nightly investigations. He barely had enough time to eat and sleep, let alone have any free time. "Well, I'm the prince, so... duh," he had declared, with the smile of a workaholic.

He had tried to tell Kuro to take some time off, but the butler had only countered with a smile and replied, "I'll think about it when you change your lifestyle, Hersch." As he had no intentions of amending his schedule in any way, the prince had no answer for this. *I just want Kuro and Oran to get their rest*, Herscherik thought, willfully ignoring the irony. Still, he believed that a boss was responsible for managing the work time of his employees.

Oblivious to the prince's plight, Oran answered without looking up from the papers. "I'll stay a little longer... Actually, I'm spending the night." Oran had had his own room prepared for him in the palace on his first day as Herscherik's knight of service. Considering that he would have to come in bright and early the next day, Oran simply couldn't be bothered to go home.

Guess I'll go home tomorrow and grab some clothes... Oran thought. *Big Bro said he was working the night shift tonight. I could ask him in the morning.* He had his room in the castle but not enough changes of clothes. If he would just spend the night in the castle, he wouldn't have to bother the servants of his house by coming home so late, either.

With those thoughts running through his mind, Oran flipped to the next set of documents on his desk. They were all the records and accounts of the incident; he'd been combing through every account from the time to see if there were any discrepancies.

Then, he noticed something. "Weird..."

Herscherik looked up from his own set of papers. "What's weird, Oran?"

Oran handed Herscherik a document. "This incident, for example." The paper

recounted an event that took place two years ago, when the drug was still in circulation. A baron went on a rampage in the red-light district, which concluded with him committing suicide by stabbing a knife into his own throat. “It says the man lost his mind and went on a rampage, but no mention as to *how* he lost his mind. Don’t you think that’s strange?”

Uncovering the root cause of strange cases like this was the most basic function of the constabulary. This paper, however, only listed the facts of the case in bullet points, with no information on the underlying causes. There were numerous incident reports that had the same problem, all of them sealed up with the “processed” stamp.

“That *is* weird. We have to look into it. But...” Herscherik hesitated. *If we can’t trust the accounts, we have to contact the victim directly.* Whoever was behind this couldn’t have obfuscated living people as easily as they could obfuscate papers. Even if the victim decided to lie, it wouldn’t be easy to fool Herscherik. As lies compounded upon each other, cracks would appear in the narrative.

“Why don’t we go talk to the victim tomorrow?”

“We?”

“What, I can’t go?” Herscherik asked, taken by surprise. *I want to investigate...* He recalled one of the detective dramas Ryoko had liked. The dandy detective with the deep voice had told her that legwork was the only way to solve a case.

“To the *red-light district*?”

“Red-light... Oh, right.” Herscherik finally understood. The red-light district wasn’t open during the day. If they wanted to go when things were open, they would have to go at night. And at night, the district was *in business*. Not exactly the kind of place a prince—much less a five-year-old—should find himself in. As Herscherik nodded in agreement, calm as can be, Oran was left befuddled. On the inside, Herscherik was a 35-year-old woman, far too old to be flustered by the mere thought of a red-light district. Which, given his five-year-old exterior, came across as extremely outlandish.

A knock at the door interrupted the awkward silence in the office. “Pardon the intrusion, Prince Hersch. His Majesty is here to see you,” Kuro called from

the hallway, with his facade on.

“Father?” Herscherik jumped out of his seat and made himself presentable before parting the mountain range of papers to move toward his living room. *It’s been a while since I’ve seen Father.* When Herscherik was living in his mother’s room in the royal quarters, his father was usually able to stop by on his way home from work. After he moved to the outer quarters, however, their schedules rarely lined up. As such, Herscherik had been seeing his father much less frequently. It was now a rare occasion for his father to come see him so late in the night—although this was earlier than when he was usually done with his duties. Perhaps he had cut his work short just to come see his youngest son. Once Herscherik realized that possibility, he couldn’t walk fast enough.

Oran watched Herscherik rush to the door, struck speechless by how the prince, who had just been discussing the concept of a red-light district with him, suddenly looked like a child his actual age. *I really don’t get it...* Oran thought. He wondered if every five-year-old child was like this or if Herscherik was the exception. Since even his youngest sister was not much younger than him, Oran had no frame of reference.

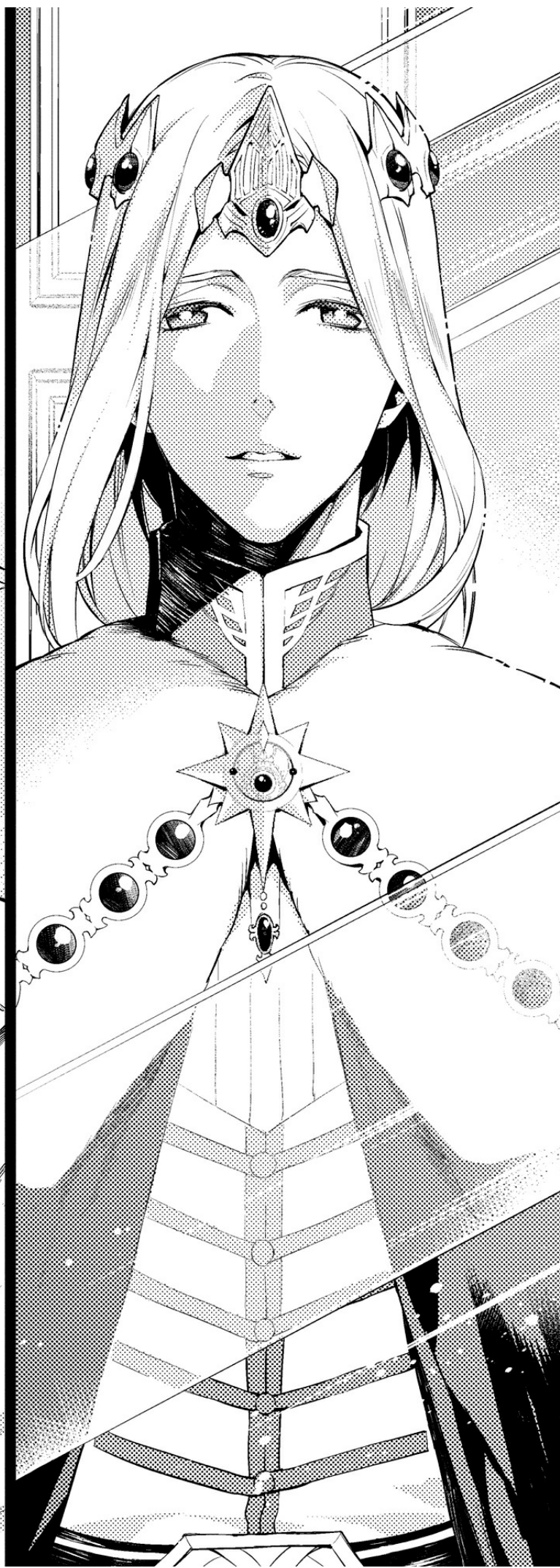
“Come here, Oránge!” a voice called from the living room, snapping Oran out of his thoughts. Come to think of it, he was about to meet Herscherik’s father for the first time—the king himself. Oran looked at himself, clad in another set of comfy street clothes. *I wish I would have listened to the black dog and wore something just a little nicer.* Kuro always had something to say about Oran wearing his street clothes. “As delinquent as you are, you’re Hersch’s knight. At least *try* to look presentable,” he’d said.

Presentable, huh...? Oran recalled what he had worn on his first day as Herscherik’s knight of service. He wasn’t going to wear *that* again. Then he thought of his uniform, which was tragically abandoned in his own room, inaccessible to him now. *I mean... Technically, the prince is my boss.* Oran resigned himself to his fate and stepped out of the office.

A calm voice greeted Oran into the living room. “You must be Octavian, General Aldis’s son. And now, Hersch’s knight of service.”

Oran looked up at the source of the voice, and words failed him.

Solye Gracis was standing before him, smiling, with his platinum hair that shone like concentrated moonlight and jade-like eyes that were just as soft and kind as Herscherik's. His youthful beauty made the king look like he was still in his twenties, despite being in his forties.



Sure, I always thought that Prince Marx was good-looking, but... The royal patriarch far exceeded his offspring in the looks department. Oran had never been particularly fond of royalty, but that animosity nearly dissipated entirely upon facing the king's beauty and his dazzling smile. *My prince seems pretty ordinary now.* Next to the king, Herscherik actually looked average—barely noteworthy at all. It wasn't that Herscherik wasn't good-looking—his face was definitely beautiful compared to the average boy—but Oran couldn't help but feel a little relieved at how *normal* Herscherik looked in comparison to his father.

"Oránge..." Herscherik glared at the frozen Oran. "Father's off-limits."

Oran couldn't comprehend the comment for a moment before realizing that his prince was still influenced by Oran's interaction with the First Prince. Oran couldn't help but feel defeated. *What am I to him...?* he thought, with a gloomy frown.

Herscherik burst out laughing. "I'm kidding, I'm kidding!"

"Prince..." Oran stared the prince down with a begrudging look, which Herscherik answered with a wave.

Solye watched the interaction with a caring smile. "Great to see you two getting along. But... off-limits in what sense, Hersch?"

Herscherik shook his head. "Nothing! Father, would you like to have tea with us if you're not too busy? Schwarz, do we have anything to snack on?"

"Yes, I'll bring it right out."

"I'll help!" Herscherik followed Kuro out of the room. While the prince wouldn't be much help, Kuro didn't protest.

Silence fell between the two who were left behind, a silence which was finally broken by the king. "I hope Hersch hasn't been asking too much of you."

"No..." Oran answered, and another bout of silence followed. *Th-This is awkward*, he thought. He was facing the king of the nation, after all. While Oran was a noble, his was a house of knights. Naturally, he had trained in the sword more than in small talk. He *had* been out in high society a bit, so he wasn't

completely hopeless at holding a conversation, but...

“Hersch...” the king continued, as Oran’s heart raced. “...He’s rather unique, isn’t he?” The king asked a question that Oran found exceedingly difficult to answer. Any answer he could give seemed blasphemous. Oran kept silent, and the king chuckled in response. “Hersch is unlike any normal child. Not because he’s a prince, but because he’s Hersch.” Oran tilted his head in confusion. The king continued. “In a way, being born into royalty might have been a misfortune for him.”

Now Oran understood. He imagined that Herscherik would not really be a different person if he had been born into a house of nobles, knights, or even a family of commoners. He would lend a helping hand whenever he saw someone in need. He never needed any rationalization—he simply didn’t hesitate to help people, no matter who they were. He was the kind of person who acted on his own accord and not out of obligations to his status. “It’s my duty to protect my people,” the prince had said, and it was not an empty statement.

Those exact words explained what Solye meant by “misfortune.” Herscherik’s royal status had forcibly expanded the number of people he wanted to protect, putting him under unimaginable pressure. Even so, Herscherik had naturally accepted all of this as simply the way things were.

“I can’t tell you how happy, and how proud, I am that Hersch is my son, but...” Solye voice grew faint. “I have put so much weight on his shoulders.” He looked into Oran’s eyes. “I need you to protect him. From everything. Above all else... ah, some king I am. I can’t even do something as simple as that.” The look in Solye’s eyes wasn’t that of a king, but of a father who cared for his son.

Silence engulfed the room once more, this time without the awkwardness. Just as Oran opened his mouth, the prince and the butler returned with the tea, preventing the knight from saying anything to the king.

Having sneaked out into the castle town with his butler and knight of service, Herscherik was taken aback by the fact that he was no longer aware of where he was. After turning numerous dark alley corners and squeezing through spaces between houses, the only thing he knew for sure was that he was

somewhere in the capital. With Kuro leading the way and Oran following behind him, Herscherik tried his best to keep up with the other two, both of whose strides were considerably longer than his.

“How far are we going, Kuro...?” Herscherik finally asked, defeated by the long walk through the alleyways without any change in scenery. Exploring the castle town under the guise of a fun covert mission was one thing, but he wasn’t fond of the endless cycle of putting one foot in front of the other without even knowing why. Truth be told, Herscherik felt like he couldn’t afford to waste a single minute in the day.

“We’re almost there,” Kuro simply answered, despite being fully aware of his master’s distress.

And how many times have you told me that...? Herscherik thought. *We don’t have time for a leisurely stroll through the back alleys.* He let out a sigh behind Kuro’s back. Since the day after his father’s visit, the three had been splitting up to go talk to the family of the victims and other people mentioned in the incident reports. Just as Herscherik had guessed, most of the victims and perpetrators suspected of drug abuse belonged to nobility, or at least wealthy families, and the higher the status of the individual, the more likely they were to totally conceal all evidence of drug use. That being said, their hesitation to disclose the details was practically an admission in and of itself. Most of their family and friends were equally reticent, which only served as more evidence to back up Herscherik’s hypothesis. Still, that hypothesis was yet to be elevated to a conclusion for lack of actual solid evidence.

Kuro and Oran had even gone to investigate the red-light district. *I’m sure they could use a little break from all that work, work, work,* the prince had thought, so he encouraged them to “have a fun night” on their way out. For some reason, Kuro dug his fist into Herscherik’s head as Oran scolded him, saying, “Don’t say things like that! You’re a child!”

I thought I was being a cool boss! Herscherik wondered why this was happening to him, having forgotten that he was a five-year-old—which happened from time to time. Not that he would recommend a fun night at the red-light district to anyone *other than* Kuro and Oran, but their reaction was entirely natural for people who had just heard something like that come out of

a five-year-old's mouth.

The three continued their investigation, using every method available to them—from verifying documents to good old legwork—until Kuro had requested his master and the knight accompany him to a particular location, making sure to mention that it was important. To this end, he had led them out into town.

Finally, Kuro came to a halt. “We’re here,” he announced. They’d arrived at a location that was steeped in shadow despite it being midday, down an alleyway narrow enough that Herscherik could reach out and touch the walls on either side of him. Kuro pointed to a door small enough that an adult would have to crouch to get through it.

It’s like that door in Wonderland that Alice goes through. Herscherik recalled a picture book that Ryoko had read when she was a child, a story about a girl following a white rabbit down a hole into a strange world. If it had been published in the modern day, it would have probably been categorized as an isekai. Ryoko had read the story over and over, daydreaming about her adventures in that world. Herscherik wondered if Ryoko had been predestined to grow up an otaku from such a young age and couldn’t help but feel a little nostalgic.

The door before him now, however, was still bigger than the one in the picture book. Kuro opened it and walked in; Herscherik followed to find a set of descending stairs. As they walked down these stairs, they were able to straighten up from their hunched position going through the door and noticed the incense-like smell growing thicker. The scent was rich, but Herscherik didn’t mind it.

When they reached the bottom of the stairs, Kuro opened another door that awaited them there. “I brought them with me, Oracle.”

“It took you longer than I thought...” an enchanting female voice answered.

The room beyond the door, despite being underground, had plenty of elbow room for the three guests. Herscherik hadn’t expected the room to be this spacious after squeezing through the tiny door and climbing down that narrow staircase. Now that his curiosity was piqued, he looked around the room. Shelves lined the walls, filled with old books and mysterious-looking objects.

Incense burned everywhere, filling the room with smoke that made the lamplight flicker mysteriously. A woman, the source of the enchanting voice, sat comfortably on a sofa, with a table between her and the three guests at the door. On the table sat a crystal ball.

A fortune teller? It was only natural for Herscherik to guess that. She had dark skin that looked even darker in the dimly lit room and long, straight hair that spilled over the sofa, looking almost as translucent as the lamp-lit purple crystal ball. Her right eye was pink and her left eye was gold. A beauty mark under her right eye further accentuated her allure. Her attire resembled that of a middle-eastern dancer, and Herscherik was reminded of *The Arabian Nights*. A translucent veil, though it did not completely hide her mouth, added to her mysterious allure. She seemed glaringly foreign in this (by the standards of Ryoko's world) Western country. More pressingly, Herscherik couldn't look away from a particular body part of hers.

They're incredible... Herscherik's eyes were locked on to a pair of voluptuous breasts on the verge of cascading out of her clothes. The twin peaks before him were shattering his prior belief that such a large bust could only exist in fiction. As a former woman, Herscherik knew full well that size alone did not a picturesque bosom make. The overall size of the chest had to be complimented by a proportional cup size, as well as just the right amount of firmness, all supported by a curvy waist. All elements had to be in complete harmony to form flawless breasts like hers. Of course, all of that was nothing more than Herscherik's personal thesis on breasts. There were probably many different opinions, all equally valid.

I am so jealous! Women often admired a beautiful example of their own sex, too. Ryoko's body had been the embodiment of Japanese flatness, except the protrusions in all the wrong places from her poor lifestyle choices. She'd turned giving up on her diet after a week into an art form.

"Are you the Seventh Prince?" Being addressed as the prince made Herscherik look up from the woman's much-too-spectacular bosom. She flashed him an alluring smile. "A pleasure to meet you. I am known as the Oracle."

"My name is Herscherik. Nice to meet you, too." *Maybe she's born with it... Maybe I love it!* Herscherik was internally dancing. He had always loved

beautiful people, men and women both, even in his previous life... Strictly for observational purposes, of course.

“You’re the prince who tamed Shadow Fang... You look more like a girl to me.” Her inquisitive gaze made Herscherik rather uncomfortable. While her eyes only shone with curiosity, Herscherik didn’t like when the observational tables were turned. Oran asked Kuro who “Shadow Fang” was, but the butler remained silent. Then, the woman’s prying eyes widened for a brief moment before narrowing in satisfaction. “Oh, I see. You *are* a girl. How interesting. Incredibly interesting.”

Herscherik tilted his head. “Um. I may not look it, but I promise I’m a boy...”

“It’s all right, little girl.” The Oracle laughed off Herscherik’s protest with the wave of her hand.

“Oracle. I bring the prince, you give us the tip. That was the deal,” Kuro spat out. Herscherik looked up at him, unable to follow. Kuro’s eyes wandered for a bit, and he opened and closed his mouth a few times before he let out a defeated sigh. “There was so little information on the drug, so I thought I’d buy a tip from the Oracle. She told me to bring you, Hersch.”

The Oracle only cared for profit, which was why Kuro gave a shot at knocking on her door. But this time, she gave the stipulation that he bring the prince. In fact, this was the first stipulation the Oracle had ever given Kuro in any of their deals. It was plain to see that he never wanted to bring the prince here at all, but he had made the decision that not bringing him along would be even worse for the prince.

“Now pay up, Oracle,” Kuro demanded.

“Let me see...” The Oracle’s slender finger traced the outline of her face from her cheek down to her jaw. Her nails were neatly painted, the glitter in the paint refracting the lamplight. After a prolonged beat, the Oracle smirked. “A hundred white gold coins sounds about right.”

“What?!” Kuro and Oran reacted in unison.

A hundred white gold coins is like winning the lottery and both one-off prizes... Herscherik quickly converted the currency into Japanese yen in his head. With

the assumption that one bronze coin in this world equated to ten yen, a single white gold coin was worth ten million yen. 100 white gold coins, then, was a *billion* yen. Who could have blamed Herscherik for letting his mind wander away from such an utterly outrageous number?

“Going back on the deal?” Kuro’s voice lowered in pitch.

Since Herscherik knew that Kuro’s voice only became so low and cold when he was genuinely furious, he braced himself to rein in his butler.

Before he could, however, the unperturbed voice of the Oracle cut through the tension. “Oh? I remember telling you that I’ll put my card on the table once you bring the prince—not that I’d give it away for free. I always demand an even exchange. This particular card can save a nation. If the price seems exorbitant, it’s only because you don’t see how important this piece of information truly is.” The Oracle met Kuro’s piercing glare with a taunting smile.

“Lives are at stake, here...” Oran spoke up with audible anger.

The Oracle scoffed at it. “That has nothing to do with me. I’m not from here. It’s none of my business how many people die. If this country goes down, I’ll find somewhere else.”

“Wha—?!” Oran was speechless.

The Oracle turned to Herscherik. “What will you do, little girl? I’m not going any lower than a hundred white gold coins. Up front, of course. There’s no point in trying to order me around, by the way. Like I said, I’m not a citizen of this country. I have no obligation to follow any orders from you.”

Herscherik closed his eyes in contemplation. No matter how far he reached, he couldn’t think of a way to come up with that kind of money. “I can’t figure out how to get the money, so we won’t be able to buy your tip.”

“Prince!” Oran’s call echoed in the room. Was the prince really going to give up on this information? With a hand on the hilt of his sword, Oran looked like he was ready to put the sharp end into the Oracle.

Herscherik stopped him with a look and added, “But I think you should pay *us*.”

“Pay... you?” The Oracle lost her confident smile for the first time as a frown took its place.

“Miss Oracle,” the prince began. “Kuro has brought us here at your request. I’ve come all this way, even though every second counts in this circumstance. Our time is precious to us. I think all of that is worth more than just hearing your asking price, don’t you? Not exactly an ‘even exchange’ as it stands right now.” Herscherik calmly laid all of this out—behind his smile, he had just demanded the Oracle pay her own price.

She fell silent for a few beats, until a muffled laughter began to pour from her mouth. The laughter soon grew louder, and the room rang with the woman’s amusement. Before long, the Oracle was doubled over, clutching her stomach as she laughed. She slammed the table in front of her with so much force that the guests were almost concerned that she would break it. All the while, her generous endowments quivered along with the rest of her. Herscherik couldn’t help but sneak an envious glance at her boisterous bosom.



“Yes! Amazing, little girl! It’s been so long since I’ve felt anything like this! I’d forgotten how good it feels!” the Oracle said, tears of laughter forming in her mismatched eyes. She got her breathing under control before continuing. “You’re right, little girl. That wouldn’t be an even exchange. I’ll give you a little hint, then.” She straightened herself out and closed her eyes. After a moment of silence, she opened her eyes ever so slightly. “Past and present. Expectations and reality. And the one in the midst of it all.” Her riddle only made Herscherik tilt his head. The Oracle chuckled. “I might have told you too much. You’ll have to figure out the rest for yourself.” *You should be able to do that much*, she seemed to insinuate. She had paid them fairly for their time.

“Okay. Thank you, Miss Oracle,” Herscherik answered.

As she gave them a dismissive wave, the three turned to leave. Then she called from behind them. “Oh, you stay, little girl. The men can wait outside.” Kuro sharply glanced at her again, but Herscherik convinced him to do as the Oracle said. Then, he and the Oracle were alone together in her room.

“I don’t make a habit of giving humans advice,” she began. Her left eye seemed to glow for a moment, but Herscherik dismissed it. It must have been the lighting. “You are a light. Many people will see you as a ray of hope.” Her tone had become solemn, in contrast to how she had spoken before. Herscherik was slightly taken aback by the change, but the Oracle didn’t miss a beat. “You will come to many crossroads in your life... times you will be forced to make a grave decision. Make the wrong choice, and you will lose something dear to you. You might lose something even if you make the *right* choice.” Her eyes met Herscherik’s. “Are you still willing to go down that path?”

Herscherik closed his eyes. *I don’t know what dear things she is talking about, but...* He opened his eyes and stared the Oracle down. He gave his answer.

The Oracle widened her eyes for an instant before giving an alluring chuckle. “You really are interesting, little girl.” She gazed up at the ceiling and seemingly through it. After thinking a moment, she added, “I’ll give you a little bonus. Make sure you don’t lose that pocket watch of yours. It will help you along the way like nothing else will.”

And with that, the Oracle shooed Herscherik out. With another word of

thanks, he left the room to be greeted by the concerned Kuro and Oran. Just then, Herscherik recalled what the Oracle had just told him. *Did I ever show her my watch?* he wondered.

However, that little question had faded from his mind by the time the party arrived at their next destination.

Chapter Six: The Orphanage, the Baron, and the Epiphany

After leaving the Oracle, Herscherik and his men exited the alleyway into a main street, which happened to be near the orphanage where Oran and his fiancée had once volunteered.

“Want to stop by the orphanage?” Herscherik offered. While he knew about the existence of the orphanage and its location from one of his secret trips into the castle town, Herscherik had never actually been there. Besides, the sun was still high, leaving them with plenty of time in the day.

“I haven’t been there in a while...” Oran said, furrowing his brows. When his fiancée was alive, she had visited the orphanage four or five times a week. Oran had gone with her at least once a week to help out with any heavy lifting or manual labor. After her death, however, he couldn’t stand to even see the place for a few months, since it reminded him so strongly of her. Even after that, he only went once or twice a month, and for very short visits. After being appointed knight of service, Oran had been too busy with his new duties during the day—and recently even at night—to visit the place. More accurately, he had been avoiding a place filled with memories of his fiancée.

Now, Oran took one deep breath. He couldn’t run from this forever. He had vowed to face his past. As if trying to leave something behind him, Oran began leading the way for his master and the butler.

The orphanage stood at the edge of the residential area. As the little group passed under the rust-spotted metal gate and approached the old stonework building, they could hear the voices of children from the open windows.

“You came back!” A girl of about Herscherik’s age greeted them. She had brown hair and big round eyes of the same color, and she ran out of the door to the building and into Oran’s arms without hesitation. “It’s been so long!” she excitedly declared, her whole body showing her joy.

“You look like you’re doing well, Colette. How’s everyone?”

“Good!” She tilted her neck as she spotted Herscherik and Kuro. “Who are they...?”

Herscherik gave a bright smile as to not scare her. “My name is Ryoko. This is Kuro. We’re Oran’s... Um, your friend’s friends.” Herscherik said this as cheerily as possible, but the girl still hid behind Oran. *Erm. I guess I didn’t make a good impression...* Herscherik couldn’t help but be a little disappointed, especially given how well Ryoko had always gotten along with her little niece.

“Octavian! It’s been too long!” A man in his fifties came out of the same door the girl had. His white hair still sported a few dark strands here and there, and he seemed unusually thin. That being said, he looked to be a noble, as he was clad in considerably well-made clothes.

“Long time no see, Baron Armin.”

“We’ve been worried about you since you haven’t showed up in so long... Are you all done with your work, Colette?”

Colette snapped out of it, shaking her head before going back into the building. Just before she made it inside, she turned around and gave a little wave. Herscherik answered with a smile and a wave, but the girl hurriedly turned the corner. *Guess she doesn’t like me...*

As Herscherik was disappointed further, the baron gave him an inquisitive look. “And who do I have the pleasure of meeting?” the baron asked. Herscherik was obviously of high rank, and Kuro had changed out of his all-black spy garb into a well-tailored outfit. Neither of them looked like the type who would be casually stopping by an orphanage.

“A son of the family I’m working for,” Oran explained, foregoing the “friend” excuse. This description was mostly true, save for the fact that Herscherik belonged to the *royal* family and that he actually worked for Herscherik himself. Oran’s appointment as a knight of service was not widespread knowledge outside of the castle proper. If he had been appointed to serve the First or Second Prince, people might have showed some interest as to the identity of that prince’s new right-hand man; however, as Herscherik was the youngest and most forgettable of the lot, his men of service were as uninteresting to the

public as he was. It was easy to believe that this baron, who seemed rather isolated from high society, wasn't privy to Oran's current occupation. "He was interested in the orphanage, so I accompanied him here. I'm sorry I didn't call ahead."

"Ah, I see." Baron Armin nodded and turned to Herscherik before greeting him with a thorough bow. "I'm pleased to make your acquaintance. My name is Armin, and I'm technically a noble—a baron, to be precise. May I ask for your name, my lord?"

Herscherik answered the baron's gentle look with a smile. He had gotten the impression that this baron was a kind man. "My name is Ryoko. I'm sorry for barging in out of the blue." *I still can't tell you I'm a prince, though*, Herscherik silently added as he bowed in response. He had sneaked out of the castle via the usual hidden passage, so disclosing his real name would have caused all sorts of problems.

"Lord Ryoko."

"No need for that; I'm just a kid. Oh, and this is Kuro behind me. He... keeps an eye on me."

Kuro gave a disgruntled look at this introduction but didn't protest. It would have been unheard of for a noble Herscherik's age to have his own butler, so this was the best excuse he could muster.

"Allow me to give you a tour." The baron led the way, his three guests in tow.

The interior of the orphanage was much cleaner and more well-maintained than Herscherik had imagined—he had expected a decrepit building infested with scuttling mice.

"Right now we have twenty children living here in all. Twelve boys and eight girls." The baron began giving a spiel about the orphanage as he led them through the building. "None of them have anywhere else to go. Some have lost their parents, while others were abandoned here because their parents couldn't afford to raise a child."

"What made you open an orphanage, Baron Armin?" Herscherik asked.

"My wife started this operation, actually... We weren't blessed with children

of our own.” The baron went on to explain that his wife had always wanted children but found that she was infertile, so she wanted to help as many children as possible by opening an orphanage dedicated to providing for the less fortunate. “It may seem to others like we’re using the orphans to make up for the lack of our own family, but...”

Just then, children came running down the hall from ahead. They seemed to be a little younger than Herscherik.

“Mister Armin, will you stay with us until bedtime?”

“Mister Armin!”

The children playfully surrounded the baron.

“Yes, I will,” he answered.

“Will you read us a story before we go to bed?”

“Will you?”

The older child asked the questions, and the younger mimicked him. After the Baron agreed, they gleefully ran off.

“...My wife and I have never considered them anything but our own children. My wife herself departed to the Garden Above a few years ago, but I wanted to preserve this place that always meant so much to her,” the baron said, waving at the children as they ran off.

“I think both you and your wife seem like wonderful people,” Herscherik reassured him. It sounded like the baron really loved the children here like his own kin. Herscherik didn’t see this as the baron using the orphans to take the place of the family he never had, and even if that were the baron’s intentions, it wouldn’t detract from the fact that he had obviously raised these children to be healthy and happy. Even if the baron had some ulterior motives, good deeds selfishly performed were much better for the world than selfless inaction.

The baron smiled at this reply, but a shadow lingered on his expression. “Is something the matter...?” Herscherik asked, picking up on the subtle shift in the baron’s demeanor.

After a moment of being taken aback, the baron answered. “Lately, I’ve been

struggling to keep this place afloat. It's affecting what I can give the children, too..."

"What? Is there no aid coming from the government?" Herscherik recalled a budget sheet he had come across in the castle. Aid for all orphanages was definitely included under social programs.

"Yes, but it's a mere drop in the bucket."

Drop in the bucket? Herscherik tilted his head in suspicion. It was a small amount of aid, but it was still enough to keep an orphanage of only twenty children from going under. Besides, if it wasn't enough, there was a process to request additional funds. It was clear to see that this orphanage wasn't squandering any government money, so Herscherik couldn't imagine them not being approved for additional aid.

But then, another possibility crossed Herscherik's mind. *Is the aid money being embezzled before it reaches them?* Herscherik wanted to collapse at the thought of this entirely plausible theory, considering the current state of affairs in the castle. An established budget not being followed meant that the extra money was most likely being pocketed. It was also possible that any request for additional aid was being brushed under the rug at some point in the bureaucracy.

"Thanks to the generous support of a church, we're making ends meet for the time being. When Octavian and his—" The baron stopped himself and looked at Oran. "I'm sorry, Octavian. I know it's a painful memory..."

"It's all right." Oran chuckled, but Herscherik saw that he wasn't as unbothered as he tried to sound. It looked like Oran laughed to conceal his pain. Then, Herscherik wondered if he himself would remain sane if anyone close to him were gravely hurt or killed. Could he act in consideration of others like Oran just did? *If Father, or anyone else in my family, or Kuro, or Oran were killed...?* Herscherik imagined what he would do if any of them, or any other people he grew to love in this world, were killed. He felt something icy drip down and pool in the pit of his heart.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I was expecting another guest today. Please excuse me." The baron's voice snapped Herscherik out of his thoughts. He felt the frozen place in

his heart dissipate at the same time. "Please feel free to visit any part of the orphanage," the baron added, hurriedly walking away.

Herscherik watched the baron leave with a stiffened expression. *What was I...?*

"Something wrong, Hersch?" Kuro whispered, noticing that the boy seemed unusually quiet.

"No, not at all." Herscherik gave a slightly forced smile to dismiss Kuro's concern. *I'll think about all that later*, he told himself and dismissed that fading emotion just like he did to Kuro.

"Here's the work room," Oran called back to Herscherik and Kuro, as they had stopped in their tracks.

Oran showed them to a room where the oldest of the orphans were chatting as they worked. They seemed to be wrapping boxes of candy and chocolate.

"They wrap these up here and sell them on the streets. They use the revenue to help run the orphanage," Oran explained.

As the children kept themselves busy with their tasks, one of the girls looked up at them.

"Hi!" called Colette, the girl they had met earlier. She gleefully ran up to Oran, which drew the attention of the other children in the room, and they jumped out of their seats.

"No way! It's been, like, forever!"

"How are you? Did you ever get to be a knight?"

"When are you going to teach me sword fighting like you promised?!"

Oran smiled at each greeting, ruffling the hair on all of their heads. It was clear to see that he was like their cool older brother who'd gone on to be a knight. His rather downturned eyes made him look less threatening, despite his tall stature. All in all, Oran was clearly great with children.

"Where is she? She never comes to see us anymore..." someone older than Colette remarked.

A look of pain flashed over Oran's face before he immediately replaced it with his usual smile. "She had to go somewhere far away," he said. "I'm sorry. She can't come see you guys anymore." The children reacted with audible disappointment.

I'm sure they're talking about Oran's fiancée, Herscherik figured. Oran and his fiancée must have helped this orphanage enough to gain the children's adoration.

"Hey! We still have work to do!" someone shouted from across the room. It was a boy, who seemed to be the oldest one there.

Herscherik turned to the voice to find a boy with short indigo hair and determined black eyes. There were three lines scored into his left cheek that resembled a claw mark. He was taller than Herscherik and obviously older.

"I'm sorry, Rick," one of the children answered. Rick huffed and went back to work, and the other children returned to their own tasks.

"Can I help?" Herscherik asked, moving to pick up one of the final products to get a closer look.

"Don't touch that! You noble brat!" Rick shouted again. It sounded more hateful than cautionary. "Must be real funny to some high and mighty noble boy, seeing us doing all this to make less money than you probably carry in your pocket," he mockingly added.

"Stop it, Rick!" Colette interjected before Herscherik had a chance to say anything. She ran up to Herscherik and apologetically bowed. "I'm sorry, Rick can be so mean... Um, Lord Ryoko?"

"Just call me Ryoko, Colette." Herscherik smiled. Colette blushed a bit and averted her gaze to conceal it. Oblivious to her reaction, Herscherik pointed at one of the wrapped bags. "You sell these?"

Colette nodded. "Yep. We neatly pack sweets, or do a little sewing... We make a little bit of money when we sell them, and the money goes to the orphanage. Some nobles buy a lot of them." Colette smiled proudly.

Still, Herscherik couldn't help but feel bitter, knowing that these children wouldn't have to do this sort of work in the first place if only their country

wasn't corrupt.

"I'm sorry to keep you waiting," the baron said as he returned. "Is something the matter?"

Herscherik shook his head. *I'm still powerless...* Despite that crippling emotion, there was no shade of resignation in his eyes.

Moonlight illuminated the dark night outside the window, whereas the room was brightly lit by Floating Magic-powered lights. Herscherik and his men had made it back to his room without issue after leaving the orphanage and sneaking back into the castle through the hidden passage. Now, the three of them were openly displaying their distress with the current situation in their own ways.

"All of that work for *nothing*... It's tough," Herscherik muttered, crossing his legs on the sofa by the window. They hadn't gained any useful information from the Oracle, and the only thing Herscherik had accomplished at the orphanage was reminding himself of how powerless he was.

"It doesn't make sense that we still don't have much to show for all our efforts," Kuro agreed.

Even Kuro can't get his hands on any more information. And we've still got no physical evidence... They were sure of the drug's involvement this time around, as they were sure of what had happened two years ago, but they couldn't follow up on any of their discoveries. The situation was extremely suspicious, considering the only missing records were all related to this drug. Herscherik assumed that someone very powerful had to be involved, but ultimately it was nothing more than an assumption. In fact, the only solid piece of evidence he had for the involvement of the same drug in the incidents two years ago and those occurring now was the tip provided to them by Roland, Oran's father. Even that tip was given off the record, and Herscherik had only coincidentally come across it because he'd hired Oran, who happened to have had a run-in with this drug two years ago. That, and he'd happened to stumble across the madman with a sword in the castle town. As the incident in the castle town was currently under investigation, there was no way for Herscherik to check on its

progress. There was a chance that it, too, would be swept under the rug just like everything else.

“Like it never even happened... Dammit!” Oran growled with frustration.

Herscherik let out a sigh. “Like it never even happened...” *Speaking of, where did the money budgeted for the orphanages go?* Setting aside funds for a just cause was pointless if that money was simply embezzled instead. Herscherik was outraged at the disarray of the nation’s finances all over again. *If I were in charge, I’d set budgets according to past needs and performance, then I’d strictly audit everything, including expenses...*

Just then, Herscherik was reminded of what the Oracle had told him. “*Past and present. Expectations and reality. And the one in the midst of it all.*” A bolt of inspiration. Herscherik leapt off of the sofa and dashed into his office. There, he rummaged through the mountains of paperwork to find the documents he was after and laid them out on his office desk.

“...I thought so.”

“Hersch?” Kuro called from beyond the open door. Both he and Oran had remained in the other room, puzzled by Herscherik’s sudden rush.

“Come in here, both of you! Hurry!” Herscherik waved them into the room and pointed at the documents. They listed each department’s annual expenses for the past five years. Notably, the fiscal year of this country began and ended in the spring, the equivalent of April to March in Ryoko’s world. “Two years ago was the only year *this* department stayed on budget.” The department Herscherik indicated was labeled “Research.”

Oran tilted his head. “If they stayed *on* budget, what’s the problem?”

“It’s usually good news. But it *is* out of the ordinary.” Herscherik showed a different document to the two men. “Research went way *over* budget every other year. “

Budgets were determined based on expenses from the previous year. If a department spent less than its budget one year, their budget would usually be slashed the next year. So, it was common business practice for most departments of a corporation or government to use up their entire budget,

even when they didn't need it.

Ryoko used to watch the occasional news story on wasteful spending in the government back in Japan. Local governments, for example, purchased unnecessary supplies in order to use up their remaining budget. If the national government determined their budget to be excessive, they would cut the budget for the upcoming year, leaving the local government with fewer funds available should they need it. This was why budgets were often stretched to the limit basically everywhere. Even at Ryoko's office, there had been times when departments tried to waste leftover money in the event they were under budget. When that happened, Ryoko promptly notified her boss, leading to the department head writing up a report and preventing the overspending.

"It's so suspicious that it happened *only* in this particular year." For some reason, the year when the drug was in circulation was also the only year the Department of Research stayed within their budget. This could have just been the result of the staff's hard work, but Herscherik couldn't shrug it off so easily. "I missed it because I was always looking at just their expenses."

Research wasn't something that usually went according to plan, anyway. Success was never guaranteed, and even a successful research project didn't guarantee fast return on their investment. It was in its nature to require more money than expected. Any cut in the budget would cause riots in every subdivision of the department. In fact, the annual expenses for every year but the one in question exceeded their budget, which lead to obvious fluctuations from year to year—indicative of a fierce battle between the treasury and Research.

The past and present are the data, Herscherik thought. *Expectation and reality means the budget and expenses*. Retracing the Oracle's riddle, he scoured the documents before him. *I found a point of suspicion, just like the Oracle said. But how does it connect to the drug? The only thing left...*

Herscherik rummaged through the documents he had on the Department of Research. Just as in the report, the expenses for the year in question were kept under budget. It was either because of the hard work of its employees, or...

This is it! Herscherik slammed his hands onto the document on his desk. That

drew the attention of his men, but Herscherik kept his eyes fixed on the document. “The Magical Chemistry Lab. Their expenses are incredibly low. *Unbelievably* low. These invoices...” Herscherik produced a few expense reports from the Magical Chemistry Lab that were dated from spring to summer of the year in question. A few technical terms, which Herscherik didn’t understand, were accompanied by product names, prices, and quantities. Then, he pulled out the same set of documents from the previous year. “These prices are completely different from last year’s. Is that even possible?” Herscherik showed the documents to his men.

“Not a chance,” Oran grumbled at the document and handed it to Kuro.

“Market price is two times that... Some of these are rare, but if I was able to get them for this low, I’d sell them for a major profit.” Kuro handed the paper back to Herscherik.

He nodded in agreement. In short, the suspiciously low annual expense of the Magical Chemistry Lab that year had remained under budget, evening itself out with all of the other years, which made the discrepancy harder to detect. *The Magical Chemistry Lab, a subdivision of Research. The one in the midst of it all. I get it.* It was just as the Oracle had said. *I was too focused on criminal cases the whole time.* The situation had started with a criminal case, so he had been fixated on investigating that front.

While the Oracle’s hint had helped him notice it, this was something that Herscherik could have realized himself if he had only paid closer attention to the documents he had. *I have to be better.* Herscherik renewed his resolve. Next time, he wouldn’t have a hint from the Oracle. One oversight could cost many lives—lives that he could have saved.

However, Herscherik concealed his self-admonishment and shifted his focus to the future. What’s done is done. Now, all that mattered was how he could use his mistake to improve.

“Then there’s the time of year when they made these suspicious purchases,” Herscherik added as the other two were comparing documents. It had been in the spring and summer, two years ago—the exact same time frame as the initial circulation of the drug. “If they got such low prices by offering their vendors a

different avenue of profit..." *There had to have been some under-the-table deal.* If so, what were they dealing with? Considering that the discounted items were expensive herbs, a considerable amount of money or goods must have changed hands.

Herscherik considered the worst-case scenario. "Was the drug developed... in the castle?" The lab could have offered the formula for the drug that they'd developed in exchange for greatly discounted materials. Naturally, whoever orchestrated the exchange must have taken their own cut, and if that someone was a government worker, the resulting cut to their expenses would have looked good on their yearly evaluation. They would have killed two birds with one stone. What's worse, any leaked research data could threaten the entire nation, let alone the Department of Research. If the constabulary was pressured to cover things up by their superiors, they would not have had any other choice but to obey, which would explain why the incident reports were so lackluster.

That being said, all of this was still only a theory. *If I can find something to tie this deal to the string of drug-related incidents.* Now that a hypothesis had been stated, Herscherik had to find evidence to back it up. The problem was that the reports at the constabulary were unreliable, and there didn't seem to be any more information he could dig out from these expense and budget reports. *Then our next target has to be...*

Herscherik turned to his butler. "Kuro, I want you to go to Legislation."

"What should I look for?" Kuro astutely asked. He didn't bother to ask why.

"The directory of officials who worked at Research, two years ago. Preferably with a list of people who worked in Magical Chemistry and documents that show staff turnover. And if you can find out who was in charge of Research's finances over at the treasury, that would be great. Oh, and the person in the constabulary who was in charge of drug investigations." Herscherik figured that only those within Research could have leaked their findings and that someone at the treasury might have turned a blind eye to documentation that had surrounded the deal. Then, if he could find out who worked the case at the constabulary, he could follow the chain of command up to the very top. "I want all info from the treasury on vendors who had dealings with Research at the time."

“Got it.” Kuro left the room without a sound.

Herscherik then turned to Oran. “Oran, I want you to remember as many people as you can who interacted with you and your fiancée two years ago. I’m sure one of them is the link between what happened then and what’s happening now.”

“All right,” Oran agreed.

But... Herscherik couldn’t help but feel something tug at the back of his mind as he began to stack the papers on his desk. *There’s something more.* A strange sensation nagged at him, like a fish bone was caught between his teeth. Herscherik couldn’t shake the feeling that he had missed something until Kuro finally returned from his mission.

Chapter Seven: The Soirée, the Rose Prince, and the Bait

Even before the soirée officially began that night, both the host and the guests were uneasily chatting among themselves. All along the spiral staircase in the main hall, the ladies and gentlemen in attendance, dressed to the nines, kept glancing at the door with anticipation. They were all waiting for a guest who occupied the pinnacle of the high society hierarchy and whose attendance had been in doubt until the last minute.

All of this had started when a friend of the host had told him that a certain someone was insisting upon attending the function. The host was ready to refuse this additional guest, as the number of invitees had already reached capacity, when he asked his friend for the name of this would-be guest, just to be safe. As soon as he did, the host completely changed his tune—and ran himself ragged to prepare the soirée down to the tiniest detail.

Said eleventh-hour guest was someone who had mostly stayed away from high society after he'd come of age. Up until his withdrawal, however, this person had been the center of everyone's attention and the star of all kinds of lavish gossip. Among the elite, he was a celebrity. In fact, newborns and toddlers might have been the only people in the entirety of Gracis to not know his name.

The soirée attendees were all eagerly awaiting the return of this individual, who would outrank every guest and even the host himself, after a far-too-long hiatus from the party scene.

"There he is!" a lady closest to the entrance whispered to her friend beside her, covering her mouth with her fan to make this quiet yet unmistakably elated announcement.

The much-awaited guest had finally appeared. He elegantly descended the spiral staircase, accompanied by a friend; his red hair and eyes flared in the light like melted rubies. His face was almost *too* alluring for a man, and he was

graceful down to the tiniest gesture. His indigo outfit, adorned all over with ornate embroidery which was clearly the result of supreme artistic dedication, further accentuated his beauty.

“It’s been so long since I’ve seen the Rose Prince in the flesh.”

“The Royal Rose... How captivating.”

The extravagantly dressed ladies gazed up at him, enchanted. Meanwhile, the other male guests of the soirée were ambitiously eying the ladies.

The host welcomed the guest as he reached the end of the spiral staircase. “Welcome, Prince Marx. I’ve been looking forward to your arrival.”

“I apologize for the last-minute request. My thanks,” the prince answered. The host couldn’t help but find even the prince’s apologetic expression to be picturesque.

This guest was none other than Marx Gracis, the First Prince, below only the king himself in status. Marx had stayed away from high society ever since graduating the academy, but now the handsome royal had lit up the entire soirée with his mere presence. The beauty bestowed upon him by his parents, the king and queen, as well as his signature billowing red hair, had earned him the monikers of “Rose Prince” and “Royal Rose”... unbeknownst to him, of course.

The host was brimming with pride that such a high-profile person had chosen his soirée as the stage for his rare venture into high society. “Such an honor, Your Highness. Please, enjoy our humble party.” The host had enough life experience to conceal his urge to jump for joy. Instead, he delivered a floor-sweeping bow and excused himself.

That served to announce the official commencement of the soirée. Some of the best musicians in the nation began to play their compositions, and the guests engaged in dancing or conversation in order to enjoy their night.

Enjoy it on the surface, at least. In truth, soirées were the battlegrounds of high society. Some nobles traded information, while others played mind games between their pleasant lines of conversation. Amidst the bladeless and bloodless battles being fought in the ballroom that night, every well-dressed

guest was following the biggest prize with glittering gazes.

Sensing the stinging looks, Marx let out a chuckle. High society hadn't changed a bit, after all this time. Marx had attended his fair number of functions before he came of age and began to work for National Defense, but never for his own enjoyment. As a member of the royal family, he always required the latest rumors being circulated among the nobility. Drinks led to complacency, and complacency loosened tongues.

Besides, in an attempt to enter the good graces of the First Prince, the nobles had rushed to entertain Marx with all sorts of gossip. The chirping of noble ladies could carry more weight than anyone realized. Innocuous gossip occasionally turned out to be important information. The ladies always came prepared with a variety of stories to draw Marx's attention, so he always knew to play nice. The nobles saw him as their prey, but Marx saw them as *his* prey, which he chased down to plunder for their spoils of information.

That being said, it wasn't that Marx didn't enjoy attending soirées. If he didn't, he wouldn't have been able to maintain his charming smile, even with an ulterior motive.

"Always a battlefield. I better watch my step," Marx muttered.

"Says the undefeated master of high society," the young man, who appeared to Marx's friend, snarkily countered.

"You never had trouble stirring the pot, Octa."

Octavian—Octa for short—frowned at Marx's reply. He was dressed in all-white knight's garb that resembled a royal guard's uniform. It was an outfit that instantly signified his status to those around him, which drew almost as much attention onto himself as Marx did. Of course, his handsome face was a significant contributing factor.

"I told you, I came out here just to..." Oran protested. "*She* was often invited to this sort of thing, thanks to her family name."

Oran recalled what had happened back then. His fiancée's family, while noble, did business on numerous fronts. Per her family's wishes, their only daughter was often invited to parties just like this one. Her reserved demeanor had

drawn attention at these functions for the opposite reason as Marx, much to Oran's dismay. If Oran hadn't stood by her side like a guard dog, he was convinced that she would have been harassed through the night by the more *unreserved* men. To an objective observer, that was only half true, though—Oran's jealousy supplied the rest of the narrative.

"The bait's been set. Let's see if they bite." Marx snickered.

"They'd better," Oran grumbled. This was the whole reason they'd come to this cacophonous soirée in the first place.

"They will," an inappropriately young voice called from behind them. This voice belonged to another prince of Gracis, albeit one who was completely overshadowed by the First Prince, Marx.

Herscherik poked his head out from behind the two tall men, maintaining a smile as he scrupulously observed the ballroom. Once he spotted his target, his smile turned positively angelic. Anyone who was familiar with Herscherik behind closed doors would have shuddered at this. His sight had been fixed on his target, who was undoubtedly looking back at them in return—although Herscherik remained concealed behind his brother and knight of service.

"I won't let this one slip away," Herscherik muttered. Despite his smile, his eyes gleamed like that of a wild beast that had spotted its prey. He looked away from the target, and looked to his brother and knight. "Let's begin." ...*The hunt*, his calm blue eyes added.

Ignac Naivey was the son of a low-ranking noble, Baron Naivey. The Naivey's were "new money," so to speak. The previous Baron Naivey had bought his title. That Baron Naivey, Ignac's grandfather, was an exceptional businessman. In a single generation, he had elevated his upper-middle-class family business into one of the biggest in the country. By offering an exorbitant dowry, he had acquired a wife from a family of nobles that was on the verge of collapse. Using his wife's family name to its fullest potential, he stacked coins on the table until he had acquired a barony. To traditional nobles, he was *nouveau riche*. That being said, obtaining any title of nobility, even the lowest ranking one, was a testament to his business prowess.

Alas, his talent for business was never passed down to his son. That became apparent once the first Baron Naivey passed and Ignac's father took over the business. While the current Baron Naivey was skilled enough to run a company of average size, it wasn't enough to handle the family business after his father had massively expanded it. As a result, House Naivey had been in the red since Ignac started attending the academy.

Ignac, faced with this family emergency, had started independently working to dig them out of their hole. Ignac was not a particularly good-looking man, with average height and slightly above average intelligence, lacking any exceptional talents. Still, he was eloquent and friendly, which made him unthreatening. He used that as his weapon, making friends with nobles of higher ranks during social gatherings. Even the elite nobles who'd looked down on Ignac as mere *nouveau riche* were eventually swayed to improve their impression of him. Then, Ignac would slide a deal their way. Before they knew it, there was a business arrangement between them.

With this tactic, Ignac was just starting to drag his family out of the mire. Perhaps he did have a shred of talent for running a business himself, albeit not as prominently as his grandfather. The other difference between the two of them was that Ignac had no intention of simply inheriting the barony. On the contrary, he was already planning his political debut. Improving his family name, while part of that agenda, was simply an added bonus.

This soirée was another part of his plan, another night of making nice with powerful nobles. And tonight, a particularly attractive target had entered the familiar hunting ground: Marx Gracis, the First Prince and next in line for the throne.

This was a huge opportunity for Ignac. However, he also loathed the man who accompanied the prince: Octavian Aldis, the third son of Marquis Aldis, one of the nation's most famous generals. Octavian had everything that Ignac wanted. Born into a reputable noble family, his father was a former general, and his brothers were all royal knights. He was blessed with talent and appearance but was still friendly and approachable. Betrothed to a daughter of a prominent family on top of all that, it seemed to Ignac that Octavian had been granted a rosy life that was exactly the opposite of his. Back in the academy, Ignac had

tried to manipulate Octavian, but he was never affected by Ignac's tricks. That had aggravated Ignac's inferiority complex, which led him to approach Octavian's fiancée in order to rob him of someone dear to him. But that endeavor had also ended in failure.

It was quite entertaining to watch him fall like that... Ignac silently mocked Octavian without letting a smidgen of it show. After the death of his fiancée two years ago, Octavian's marks in the academy fell like a landslide. Even his friends and teachers who were concerned with the sudden change eventually gave up on him. Octavian used to be the top of his class, but in the end he only barely passed. Ignac had never enjoyed watching anything as much as he did that.

However, recent news about Octavian had ignited Ignac's inferiority complex all over again. He had purposefully approached the man he loathed in order to confirm the rumor, wearing the perfectly innocuous mask of a friendly smile.

"It's been too long, Octavian," Ignac said, approaching.

"Yes... It has, hasn't it."

Ignac felt a sense of victory at how Octavian had stared in surprise for a moment before his expression twitched slightly in annoyance. It was a wonderful sensation to see the man who had made being top of the class look so easy turn toward him in annoyance now.

"Since graduation, right? It's not every day you show up to a soirée..." Ignac observed Octavian. The other man's curly, sunset-colored hair was shot through with golden highlights and neatly combed back. He noticed that Octavian's outfit was not particularly suited for a soirée, but instead looked like a knight's uniform worn by the royal guards. Ignac had never seen this particular outfit, which seemed to add credence to the rumors he'd heard. With another glance, he became convinced of their validity.

Ignac spotted what was attached at Octavian's waist: a non-decorative, functional sword. As a general rule, no one but the guards on duty were allowed to carry any weapons at soirées, with one exception: knights of service who guarded royalty or knights who were themselves descended from royal bloodlines. Knights of service were allowed to keep their weapons at any place and any time since they were permitted by the king to serve their master above

all else.

The shred of superiority Ignac felt had already dissipated. “So you really are a knight of service.”

“Yeah... It feels like it happened before I realized.” Octavian chuckled.

Ignac’s envy was reignited. *Before you realized...!?* Anyone with a title like that was a trusted right-hand man to the royal they served. It was a highly coveted title for most. Yet, Octavian didn’t brag about his position or show any humility; he acted like he *deserved* the position. That thought made Ignac see red.

Just when he was about to give in to his emotions and begin shouting, a jarringly young voice interrupted their conversation. “Oránge, what’s wrong?”

Ignac turned toward the interruption to find a boy who could pass for a girl looking up at him and Octavian with a quizzical expression. Ignac could only tell he was a boy because he was dressed like one; otherwise, the child was adorably androgynous and frail enough that his gender was easy to mistake. Ignac observed his silky, light blond hair; his eyes like pure jade; his immaculate, fair skin; and his emerald-colored outfit decorated with intricate embroidery of gold and silver—most likely chosen to highlight his golden hair.

“I was just speaking with an acquaintance of mine, Prince.”

“Really? Will you introduce him to me?” The boy met Ignac’s gaze and flashed a smile.

Ignac immediately recognized him. *He’s the Seventh Prince, Herscherik...* He remembered that the prince had just turned five this year. It was rumored that he was not as striking in appearance as the older princes and princesses. True, Herscherik wasn’t as stunning as Marx, but they were both children of the king, who had a sort of everlasting beauty. Even though Herscherik might have seemed unremarkable in the royal family, he clearly rose above the average of ordinary people. On the other hand, the little prince was still five.

The youngest prince, who seemed unfamiliar with the party scene, trotted up to Octavian and tugged at the knight’s garb as he nervously looked up at Ignac.

Ignac immediately knelt and met the prince’s eyes wearing his friendly smile.

“It is an honor to behold Your Highness, Prince Herscherik. I am Ignac Naivey, son of Baron Naivey. My family also has a business that deals in various industries. I humbly request your acquaintance.” Ignac ceremoniously bowed. *I’ve heard that the Seventh Prince is the king’s favorite. No harm in making a good impression.* He grinned as he kept his head down.

Unaware of Ignac’s scheming, Herscherik smiled at the greeting and urged him to stand. “Thank you. My name is Herscherik. So you and Oránge—Octavian know each other?”

Ignac realized that Herscherik had called Octavian by a nickname, which showed that he had already gained the prince’s trust. Ignac’s envy for Octavian burned brighter, but he didn’t show any sign of it. “Yes, since the academy. I’ve also spoken to Prince Marx on a few occasions while we were in attendance together.”

“Really?!” Herscherik looked shocked, glancing at Marx who stood nearby, smiling amidst a pool of ladies. Then, Herscherik stared at Ignac intently, as if he was dying to say something.

“Shall I bring you something to eat, Prince...?” Octavian offered, looking like he wanted to escape for a moment. Herscherik nodded and asked for something sweet.

Ignac smirked at the interaction. It felt validating that the prince had prioritized speaking with him over his own knight.

Once his knight was gone, Herscherik reluctantly spoke. “Lord Ignac...”

“Please, Your Highness. Call me Ignac,” he offered with a smile.

Herscherik seemed relieved. “Ignac. Given your friendship with Oránge, I want to ask your help with something,” he said with a dire expression. He led Ignac to a quiet area behind a pillar, dropping his voice so no one else could hear. “My brother Marx seems sad lately.” Herscherik added that Marx had begun working for National Defense after graduating the academy and that he seemed a little withdrawn. Then, he gave his brother another concerned look.

Ignac followed the prince’s gaze to find Marx still surrounded by the ladies of the soirée, but with a slightly depressed air about him somehow. Now that

Herscherik had mentioned it, Ignac recalled hearing that the First Prince seemed depressed lately. But, he was the Rose Prince, after all. Ignac had dismissed all of that out of hand...

“He told me he’s feeling the pressure of being the oldest prince, now that he’s come of age... confidentially, of course. So, I wanted to bring my brother out here to cheer him up. It just seems like he’s always so tense...” Herscherik added, showing his deep concern for his brother. “But this turned out to be a stupid idea. Ignac, is there something I can do for my brother that will help him lighten up and ease his burden a bit? You said that your family runs a business. Do you have any good ideas?”

“Let me see...” Ignac put on a façade of contemplation, all the while jumping with joy under the surface. *This is my chance!* An extremely important chance, at that. If he could curry favor with the king now, his ambitions could very well become a reality. In fact, if he played his cards right, he might even open a path to becoming a minister one day, allowing him to run the nation to his liking.

With that thought, Ignac consciously suppressed his emotions, as they threatened to twist his concerned frown into a wicked grimace. “I do have a particular product that we usually reserve for our most important business partners. But I am sincerely moved by Your Highness’s love for your brother, so it would be my pleasure to provide it.”

“Really?!” Herscherik showed a genuine smile of gratitude.

Ignac responded with a smile that stemmed from an entirely different emotion than Herscherik’s. “I do have one condition. I’ll need to meet you both in a particular room in the manor, with only Your Highness and Prince Marx in attendance.”

“Wait, without Oránge?” Herscherik nervously asked.

Ignac made his smile reassuring and continued. “Yes, Your Highness. It is *very* exclusive merchandise.”

“Okay,” the prince answered after a beat.

As Ignac designated the time and place to meet, Herscherik checked the time on his silver pocket watch (an unusual affectation for such a young boy) and

noded in agreement. Then, Octavian called for Herscherik, holding a cake that would have made any child ecstatic. “See you later, Ignac!” As his concern turned to excitement, Herscherik trotted away.

After watching the prince leave, Ignac turned around to find the host so he could set aside a room. He had already given the host a good amount of money, which would make this an easy task. He also thanked his lucky stars that he’d brought along an extra supply of that merchandise. The only thing he had to do now was make sure they truly had the room to themselves.

Everything’s been going my way since I got my hand on that stuff. A secret line of merchandise he had acquired that spring and never made public... Thanks to it, Ignac had earned many connections and information—in addition to money, of course. *I’m far from done. I’m going to keep climbing... That’s what I was born to do!* Secretly lit up with determination, Ignac hurried his steps.

Meanwhile, Herscherik had accepted the slices of cake from Oran after finding a seat in a corner of the ballroom away from the crowd. Oran had brought him square-cut slices of three different cakes: a chocolate one, a seasonal fruit tart, and a chiffon cake. They were small pieces, only about three bites for an adult, but Herscherik took more than double that to finish them off. After cutting the cakes into smaller pieces, he took a bite of chiffon cake. The fluffy texture was followed by the delicate aroma of tea. He combined the next bite with the side of whipped cream, which drew a smile out of him. While the cakes were not quite as good as Kuro’s, they were all tasty and intricately decorated.

As he continued to eat his cakes, Herscherik gave his knight of service beside him the stink eye. “Stick with the plan, please.”

“Sorry...”

Even as he glared at the rueful Oran, Herscherik continued to chow down on the cakes. He thanked Oran as the knight handed him a cup of tea at just the perfect moment. Herscherik downed the cup, settling down. *It looked like you were going to slice him up with your sword if I hadn’t grabbed your shirt to stop*

you. Herscherik let out a sigh, recalling the interaction.

According to their original plan, Herscherik wasn't supposed to show himself until a little later on. Oran was supposed to guide the conversation to lure Ignac in deeper. Upon actually seeing their target, however, Oran had even kept a hand on his sword where Ignac couldn't see. *Scared the crap out of me... But I can't blame him too much.* Ignac was the noble who had approached Oran's fiancée, according to her diary. If Herscherik's deduction was correct, Ignac was very likely to be involved with the drug circulation. When Herscherik grabbed the hem of Oran's garb, he did understand how his knight felt. Oran had been squeezing his fist tight, hiding how badly he was shaking and any sign of his emotions from their target, desperately trying to keep himself under control.

Knowing how much Oran usually acted on reason, Herscherik saw how much his fiancée had meant to him. At the same time, Herscherik believed that Oran would have kept himself under control even without the interruption. While he had only known Oran for a short while, Herscherik already trusted his knight fully. The prince had interrupted him early mostly to lower the chances of Ignac growing suspicious.

"Is the black dog ever coming back?" Oran whispered to Herscherik.

That's what Oran always called Kuro. In turn, Kuro called Oran a delinquent knight, and neither of them called the other by name. While Herscherik had been worried that they weren't getting along, they were at least comfortable enough with each other to exchange trash talk and jokes. Herscherik wanted to ask them why they didn't call each other by name—at some point, at least.

"Not yet," he answered Oran.

Kuro was busy sneaking into the Naivey manor at the moment to search for more evidence of the drug. He was their back-up plan in case Ignac didn't take the bait, but it seemed like that wouldn't be necessary. *Our quarry is already caught in our trap. It's up to us how we cook it.* Herscherik finished the last bite of his chocolate cake and stood up.

Herscherik approached his brother, still surrounded by a swarm of ladies. He couldn't help but be impressed by Marx's behavior. While his status as First Prince undoubtedly made him used to social interaction, he was relaxed,

enjoying his conversations with the women around him. Perhaps he was a natural flirt.

Herscherik did wonder what reaction his brother would have to the nicknames that had been bestowed upon him, like the Rose Prince and Royal Rose. Accordingly, the rose of high society had only stayed away from the party scene because he was simply too busy. Herscherik knew that anyone would be busy during their first year on the job.

However, it was time to wrap up the soirée for Marx. Wearing an innocent expression, Herscherik dove into that field of flowers surrounding a single rose, with Oran in tow. Why? Because even Herscherik was scared of charging through a battleground packed with women, all alone. He knew from his previous life that a woman's battlefield could be the greatest danger to one's mental health.

Ignac had selected an extravagantly decorated room, filled to the brim with gilded furniture, taxidermy, and an abstract painting ceremoniously hung above the mantle. Herscherik and Marx had just gotten here, and they were already sick of the interior. As they lived their lives surrounded by the well-crafted masterpieces of the castle, the aggressively expensive-looking furniture in this particular room just seemed gaudy.

That being said, Herscherik didn't really know how much the furniture in his own room cost. It had been prepared by the manager of the outer quarters under Herscherik's request for "simple and functional" pieces. When he'd first seen how his room was decorated, he'd been quite satisfied with its tastefulness—that is, until Kuro did his precautionary inspection. The butler's face had stiffened for a moment, and Herscherik called him out on it.

After some hesitation, Kuro had replied, "All of this furniture is really expensive."

"What?!" Herscherik froze at the comment, looking all around the room. Everything looked like simple, mass-produced furniture, the kind of thing one might find at a Swedish furniture chain in his previous life.

"This desk, for example. While the structure is simple, it's made with top-

quality lumber. And here's the mark of a carpenter regarded as the best in the whole country. I think there's a five-year waitlist for his work right now. I don't even know how many gold coins this would cost. And this couch—"

"I'm sorry, Kuro. If you keep going, I won't feel right using *any* of this." Herscherik was devastated that he'd unknowingly contributed to wasting tax money on luxuries. That being said, not using the things that had already been given to him would have been an even worse waste. So, Herscherik had been timid about using his furniture until he got used to the idea.

Still thinking about his own furniture, Herscherik sat down on the gaudy sofa and looked up at his brother beside him. Marx seemed elated, peacefully humming some tune. Herscherik was concerned for a moment about the upcoming interaction, but one thought about how he'd handled the scene at the party wiped all his concerns away.

At that moment, Herscherik realized that this was the first time he'd spent any extended amount of time with his brother alone, and he couldn't help but feel like he was on the edge of his seat with excitement over the prospect. Although Herscherik had spent much time with his father since his reincarnation, he had met his brothers almost exclusively in passing. Of course, Herscherik being wrapped up in his own schemes had a great deal to do with that.

He looked up at his brother again, and their eyes met. Herscherik felt a little awkward now that his brother knew that he'd been secretly observing him. Brushing it off with a chuckle, Herscherik remembered that he had yet to express his gratitude to his brother.

"Thank you, Brother Marx."

Marx smiled in return. It was a natural smile, unlike the one he had been showing the ladies of the soirée. "No need for formalities—just call me Marx. No need to thank me, either. I just wanted to help in any way I could." Sorrow crept into Marx's expression. Herscherik thought for a moment before he sussed out that his brother was talking about Oran. "After all, I couldn't help him two years ago." Herscherik asking for this favor was like a lifeline to Marx.

A week before the trap set in the middle of a soirée, around the time when the cover of night was just starting to creep in on its tiptoes, the Seventh Prince and his two men held a conference in the prince's chambers in the outer quarters. After the Oracle's riddle illuminated the possibility of the Research department's under-the-table trade and leaking of classified information regarding their experimental drug two years ago, Kuro had gathered a list of relevant government officials.

Oran recognized one particular name on the list. It was the name of a nobleman who had served as the assistant to the Magical Chemistry lab director. However, he had been listed as dead by illness, dated just around the same time when the drug circulation had stopped two years ago. The nobleman in question had preferred glamorous gatherings like soirées and had spoken with Oran's fiancée on a few occasions, which made him stick out in the knight's memory. Herscherik immediately ordered Kuro to dig up everything he could on that man. The investigation revealed that he was neck-deep in debt—that is, until he paid everything off in one lump sum.

"He's got to be the one." There was no doubt about it in Herscherik's mind. The noble was a big spender and an avid gambler. His finances were so bad that he was constantly pestering his peers for loans. Herscherik assumed that he never managed to get his spending or gambling under control, so he resorted to selling the castle's research findings. His debt was so large that Herscherik couldn't think of any other way he could have paid it off. As the assistant to the lab director, the man would have had access to the locked archives where the data was kept, and no one would think twice about him accessing it.

It was easy to imagine that he'd roped in the person who handled auditing at the treasury, since they shared the same vices. He, too, had died in an accident during the same time frame. The businesses listed on the invoice—the ones that must have bought the leak—had already gone under, leaving no trace behind. Finally, the incident was obviously tied to the drug.

Even so, since it seemed like all traces of the matter had been wiped cleanly away, Herscherik wondered if someone had already followed the exact train of thought he was on.

"But, Prince," Oran asked, "they're dead. Who's selling the drug now?"

Herscherik nodded, setting aside his drop of suspicion about the whole affair. It was a valid question, and Herscherik already had a guess. “The list I asked you for, Kuro?”

“Right here.” Kuro handed over another document. It was the list of guests for soirées and tea parties that took place in the capital during the spring and summer two years ago.

“How did you put that together?” Oran asked, dumbfounded.

“You expect me to tell you?” Kuro smirked.

While Herscherik had the urge to demand an answer himself, Kuro was a former spy who had earned a reputation in the underground. Any form of reconnaissance was a piece of cake to him.

Herscherik began marking up the list with a few colors of fountain pen. First, he noted the noble that leaked the drug, followed by a few more names in a different color. “Look,” he said. “The people involved in those unsolved cases two years ago have, at some point, all attended the same soirée or tea party as the people involved in the leaks... Including your fiancée, Oran.” It was possible that drug deals were occurring at the social gatherings, and that was where Oran’s fiancée had crossed paths with those involved.

Oran’s brows twisted at Herscherik’s remark. “I’ve gone with her to these things... It didn’t look like she bought anything there.”

“You didn’t have an eye on her the whole time, did you? It’s also possible that there were other accomplices.” Herscherik assumed that Oran’s fiancée wouldn’t openly buy drugs while he was watching. It was also plausible that there was more than one dealer.

Oran had no retort. In fact, he *hadn’t* kept an eye on her constantly.

“Then fetch me the guest lists for parties that took place, from the beginning of the drug’s resurgence until very recently. And the list of questionable deaths, both by sickness and accident,” Herscherik said.

At this point, Oran caught on. “You think the drug is being trafficked at parties, just like it was two years ago?”

“I think it’s very likely.” Herscherik had been wondering how the drug had stayed exclusively among the rich and powerful. If it was available in the underground, commoners would have also gotten their hands on it. Even though they’d heard of rumors about the drug, almost no commoner had ever actually taken it, and none of them had died in suspicious circumstances.

“This drug targets the rich and noble... People who can afford to pay premium prices.” In addition, nobles were sensitive about appearances. Most would not go public about losing a relative to addiction. That being said, they wouldn’t want the constabulary to investigate too far and discover the truth. Herscherik guessed that their refusal to cooperate with investigations contributed to the lackluster reports, in addition to pressure on the constabulary itself from higher up. Oran might have been the exception to the culture of secrecy, but even his fiancée’s family had acted like she’d simply died of illness. They’d even packed up their business and fled to the countryside to avoid suspicion.

“A higher price per transaction means making more with little product. And a quick debt repayment.” Herscherik assumed that circulation had been halted because the main dealer had died of illness... Of course, it was doubtful that was the actual cause of death. Like a match touched to a fuse, his death had set off a chain reaction of disappearances among everyone else involved in the leak... almost as if that had been the plan all along.

Herscherik was confident that someone with a particular purpose was behind the drug’s resurgence. *They gave it two years... deliberately.* He had a bad feeling about it, but the young prince shook his head to chase the thought away. For now, he had to focus on the mystery at hand.

Herscherik and his men immediately began cross-referencing the victims of the strange incidents with each party’s guest list, looking for someone who had attended a gathering with each and every victim. As it turned out, someone fit the bill.

“That’s—!” Oran snarled, having spotted the man’s name. He grew visibly angry.

“Someone you know, Oran?”

“A friend from my academy days. A noble who tried to put the moves on my

fiancée.”

The man’s name was Ignac Naivey. The heir to Baron Naivey, Ignac did well in school, told good stories, and was a fun person to have around. Oran, who attended the knight’s curriculum, and Ignac, who attended the exclusively noble scholastic curriculum, had been friends of a sort... or, so Oran had thought.

Oran had trusted him and eventually introduced his fiancée to him. However, Oran’s trust in his friend was shattered the day he read his fiancée’s diary. When he learned that Ignac had cornered and harassed her, Oran confronted him about it. Ignac feigned ignorance, claiming that he had spoken to Oran’s fiancée but had not made any untoward advances nor done anything to pressure her. As long as Ignac maintained that story, Oran had no way to pursue the matter any further. As far Oran knew, Ignac hadn’t actually committed a crime, and making a scene about it would only damage his fiancée’s honor.

He’s the one who... Oran reached for the hilt of his sword without even knowing it. He would have torn Ignac limb from limb, if he could.

Herscherik noticed Oran’s state of mind and shook his head. “No, Oran. There’s no proof, yet.”

“But...!”

“I know. But we can’t charge him with a crime without proof.”

“Then what am I supposed to do?! Just let him go, again?!” Oran shouted.

Herscherik coolly answered. “Calm down, Oran. I have no intention of letting him go.” Herscherik knew that Oran was right. They couldn’t let this slide—they had to make a move. Herscherik wasn’t going to let the culprits go unpunished. “So what if we don’t have proof? Let’s go make some.” Herscherik grinned a very evil grin.

“What do you mean...? We’re going to *manufacture* evidence?” Kuro asked.

“That’s not exactly the case,” Herscherik answered, resting his chin in his hand. He had a plan in mind and knew that he and his two men could prepare everything they needed. “But I’m not good enough to be...”

They needed bait. It was doubtful that Herscherik would serve to lure their

prey. In fact, he probably wouldn't. "What to do...? Ah, I think I've got it."

A certain person popped into his mind at that moment. It was a gamble, and this might very well obliterate the illusion of being an innocent five-year-old he had maintained in front of his family. ...*In fact, there's no way it won't.*

Herscherik knew full well how inconceivable his existence was. Secretly, he was a woman in her thirties in the body of a five-year-old. If that five-year-old began doing or saying things that didn't fit with his age, Herscherik imagined that any sane person would throw him straight into an asylum. That's why Herscherik had always played his innocent child role with utmost care in front of his family and strangers alike. As a result, only a very select few in this world knew how Herscherik *really* was.

Of course, he hadn't realized yet that more people saw through his act than he thought. *But...* Herscherik looked to Oran. There was only one strategy he could think of that could save his knight with the sunset-colored hair and resolve the drug-trafficking incidents at the same time. "Guess I better get to it," Herscherik muttered and stood up from his favorite sofa.

Marx welcomed a surprise guest into his room in the outer quarters, late at night. As a member of the military, Marx's only free time in the day was between having dinner and going to sleep. He was enjoying a relaxing read on the sofa when his servant in the room announced the guest.

"Herscherik?" Marx repeated incredulously, looking up from his book. He checked the time to find that it was already close to midnight. While Marx was surprised that his youngest brother was awake this late, this was also the first time that Herscherik had ever visited him in his room like this.

When the servant showed Herscherik in, the young prince was completely devoid of his usual childlike demeanor. After watching the servant bring in some tea and leave the room, he turned to Marx.

What's the matter? Marx wondered. Herscherik was gazing up at him as if searching for the right words, without a sign of his usual gentle air about him. *Is this about...?!* Marx recalled his youngest brother's bizarre misunderstanding the other day. Something about him having feelings for Octavian... Was that the

topic he was trying to broach? Marx felt himself break out in a cold sweat.

Meanwhile, Herscherik finally mustered the courage to speak up. "I have a favor to ask of you, Brother Marx."

He's not going to ask me to "give up my feelings" for Octavian, is he!? If his little brother were to utter such horrifying words, Marx would be absolutely lost.

"I need your help," Herscherik said.

There was a beat before Marx reacted. "With what...?" He was pleasantly surprised that Herscherik hadn't brought up that unthinkable topic. At the same time, Herscherik's tone had completely changed. Marx sat up straight. The difference in Herscherik's demeanor was unmistakable, but Marx chose to keep quiet and let his brother finish.

Herscherik explained everything: the string of drug-related incidents that had occurred two years ago, the recent possibility of someone leaking research from the castle laboratories, and all the information he had gathered so far. While it was difficult for Marx to imagine that a five-year-old had done all of that himself, he didn't doubt the validity of Herscherik's findings. Herscherik had explained his conclusions so logically that Marx hardly entertained the idea of refuting him.

"I wanted to take care of this on my own..." Herscherik bit his lip. "But I can't."

Marx understood why. If they were to enact Herscherik's plan, it was crucial for them to choose the right person as bait. As a child, and the *Seventh* Prince, Herscherik simply didn't have enough pull in this case. Marx figured that Herscherik had come to him, the oldest prince, for that exact reason.

"All right." Marx nodded. It was an easy decision if this could help him atone for what happened two years ago in any way. Besides, as the crown prince, Marx had more responsibility to take care of all this than Herscherik. Not only did he want to help his youngest brother see this through, but he just wanted to do *something* about the situation.

Marx saw Herscherik smile happily at the answer. For the first time,

Herscherik's expression seemed completely genuine. *And if we solve this case, maybe I can finally...* Marx thought that he might finally make up his mind about something he had carried with him since the day he failed to help Octavian two years ago.

"Then, Marx... Please call me Hersch." Herscherik smiled and turned to the door before them. As Marx followed his gaze, the door slowly began to open.

"Show time, Hersch." Marx was wearing a terribly alluring smile.

Chapter Eight: Jealousy, Hatred, and the Way Out

The tip of the blade flashed, reflecting the light in the room; the sword itself was pointed straight at Ignac Naivey, who had fallen backwards into a sitting position on the carpet. The flame of envy burned even brighter than hopelessness in his eyes, as he glared at the blade's wielder. "Why do you always—?!"

Octavian Aldis accepted this accusation. The knight, whom his master called Oran, coldly stared back at his former friend. While Oran had managed to maintain a calm demeanor, his master could sense the fire of hatred roaring within him. The only thing stopping Oran from slicing Ignac's head from his shoulders right now was his master's command.

"That was easy. I thought this would be more of a challenge." Marx, sitting next to Herscherik, leisurely sipped from his cup of tea. Only moments ago he'd been wearing a woeful expression that seemed to carry the collective hopelessness of the entire world, but he'd entirely banished that. Now he was watching Ignac with something akin to amusement.

I certainly didn't overestimate my brother. Herscherik recalled the events that had just transpired. As soon as their target entered the room, Marx immediately seduced him with a smile that could have taken down an entire nation. Of course, Marx hadn't "seduced" him in *that* sense of the word... but the way Ignac blushed like he was being approached by the woman of his dreams might have suggested otherwise. Herscherik had begun to imagine his brother and Ignac in a more *compromising* situation, but he immediately quashed that particular daydream. Since Herscherik hadn't been that into the genre in his former life, it seemed that he'd only entertain the thought when both participants were good-looking—both in this world and his last.

At first, Marx glanced over Ignac with a dubious expression. In fact, the prince looked like he couldn't scarcely be bothered with any of this. In turn, Ignac threw everything he had at Marx in order to worm his way into his good graces.

He mixed in compliments with sympathetic words, pleading to be allowed to help him.

Marx had pretended to gradually grow more friendly toward Ignac. The prince had put on such a convincing act that Herscherik was secretly sweating bullets the entire time, worried that Marx's agreement was genuine. If not for Marx's stellar performance—almost good enough to convince those who *knew* he was acting—Ignac might have grown suspicious at some point. He wasn't an idiot. If Ignac had the slightest hint that something was up, he could have easily abandoned the whole deal and walked out the door.

But he did not. Instead, he produced a glass bottle... filled with his "merchandise," disguised as individually wrapped hard candy. That instant, Herscherik called for Oran to charge into the room and detain Ignac.

"It's just candy, Prince Marx! This is an illegal arrest!"

Seeing that Ignac was still attempting to weasel out of this, Marx set his cup down on the table and sighed. "You were just telling me a moment ago that these will make me forget my hardships. Brighten my mood and outlook. That I simply wouldn't be able to stop taking them... You're saying those statements *aren't* describing an addiction?"

"I never said they were drugs!" Ignac continued to ramble, despite the sword pointed at him.

Herscherik and Marx both let out a sigh, visibly exasperated that he was still trying to maintain the charade.

"That's enough." Oran's low, angry growl reverberated through the room before either of the princes could speak. "Admit it. You've been peddling this drug. That much is irrefutable now. You can't talk your way out of this."

"You're the one who needs to admit the truth." Ignac tauntingly stared Oran down. "You make a couple of royal friends and suddenly you're flaunting your newfound power...? Oh, wait. No. I get it now. You're still confused about what happened and think it was *my* fault your fiancée died." Ignac's lips twisted in a grotesque smirk. "You're the one who pushed her to it. Not me." At this point, Oran's expression faded completely. Both Herscherik and Marx knew that was a red flag. On the other hand, Ignac was too busy insulting Oran to notice. "It's

because you abandoned your girl to go stoke your ego that she turned to drugs and died! I had nothing to do with it!”

Oran’s sword, powerless, sunk to the floor. Ignac’s smirk turned victorious. Then, Oran raised his blade to deal the miserable man before him a fatal blow.

“Oránge.” Herscherik’s voice wasn’t raised. All he did was quietly call his knight’s name.

Even so, Oran halted at that command that utterly forbade any form of noncompliance. “Prince...!” Oran looked at Herscherik, pleading.

Herscherik returned the gaze with a resolute look in his eyes.



Seeing that Oran had stopped, Herscherik stood up from the sofa and pointed to the glass jar. “You said these aren’t drugs, right, Ignac?”

“Y-Yes, Your Highness. A simple jar of candy.”

“Good. In that case...” Herscherik smiled. Marx saw a deep and dark potential in that smile, in stark contrast to his younger brother’s surface level friendliness. A shiver ran down his spine. “You can eat the whole thing, can’t you?”

Maintaining his smile, Herscherik reached for the jar and picked out one of the individually wrapped (what Ignac insisted to be) pieces of candy and handed it to Ignac. “Of course you can, if it’s just candy. Why don’t we get you a cup of tea to go with it?” Herscherik carried on without allowing Ignac to get a word in edgewise. Ignac scuttled backwards, attempting to distance himself from the prince and the jar of drugs, before Oran quickly stepped behind him and stopped him with his blade against Ignac’s neck.

“Where are you going? If it’s just candy, there’s no problem if you eat them, right?”

“I—”

“Why won’t you eat them?” Herscherik walked around the table, approaching Ignac one deliberate step at a time. When Herscherik finally stood directly in front of him, Ignac averted his gaze and fell speechless. Herscherik’s smile faded. He unwrapped the object in his hand to find that the drug really *did* look just like a hard candy. “I get it. You don’t want to die like they did.”

They had looked into the cases further to find that everyone who was forced to go cold turkey from this drug had died, without exception. Even the young man who had been arrested thanks to Herscherik and Oran’s efforts had died in his cell during interrogations. His cause of death was marked as “mysterious deterioration.”

“It’s already unforgivable that you sold this knowing it could kill people. On top of that...” Herscherik was just as enraged by what Ignac had said in this room as he was by his illegal dealings. “It was *Oran’s* fault that his fiancée died?” The sword against Ignac’s neck quivered ever so slightly. “Only in your

wildest dreams was it *his* fault. Oran wasn't working hard just for himself, but for his fiancée, too. Just because their love for each other led to tragedy... that doesn't give you the right to mock any part of it."

Hard work often doesn't pay off, Herscherik thought. People couldn't always get what they wanted, except in their own imagination. Thinking this, the little prince turned from Ignac to Oran. "I wasn't going to mention this," he began, and continued with a pained expression as if he was the one who had suffered a tragedy, "but everyone *knew* Ignac was after your fiancée, Oran."

Oran looked shocked. Back in the academy, Oran did have people he called friends, Ignac among them... until his grades and his reputation plummeted, that was. Oran had always blamed his own behavior for his friends distancing themselves from him. But none of those friends, despite maintaining a cordial relationship until after his fiancée's death, had ever warned Oran of Ignac's intentions.

"Are you sure?" Marx asked. That scandalous gossip had evaded even the ears of Prince Marx.

"Kuro looked into it," Herscherik confirmed. Oran's classmates knew that Ignac was jealous of Oran and had made advances on his fiancée. However, given that Oran and his fiancée outranked Ignac in terms of their family name, most of them didn't believe that it would make any difference. Besides, those who were jealous of Oran and/or his fiancée made a point *not* to mention it to the couple.

Then, his fiancée passed away (from illness, as far as most people knew) and Oran's grades began to suffer. His former classmates had regaled Kuro with the whole story, enjoying every minute of the retelling. To their kind, nothing was sweeter than the misfortune of others.

"Ignac." Herscherik turned back to the man immobilized on the floor. "I heard you weren't only jealous of Oran, but you wanted to take advantage of the influence and connections available to him and his fiancée's house. You befriended Oran and his fiancée with that motive from the very beginning." Herscherik saw the color drain from Ignac's face. "Before she started using, she came to ask for your advice as a friend, didn't she?" Ignac's shoulders quivered.

Herscherik didn't slow down his attack. "But you said things to *worsen* her anxiety."

"H-How did you...?"

"Shouldn't have boasted about it, even after a few drinks. No one's going to keep a secret they heard over drinks. Especially if it doesn't affect them." Herscherik carried on. "I don't think you're to blame for *everything* that's happened, though."

Humans felt a wide variety of emotions. Positive ones like joy, love, and aspiration—and negative ones like jealousy, hatred, and fear. Together, they formed the human heart. There was no light without shadow; so, Herscherik didn't necessarily blame Ignac and his classmates for feeling jealous of Oran.

However, Ignac had used his jealousy to justify hurting someone else, instead of using it as motivation to improve himself. Herscherik also felt jealous sometimes, had unpleasant thoughts, or carried cold and dark emotions within himself. Still, he always tried not to be overcome by it—to maintain control of himself. However, he didn't intend to force others to subscribe to the same philosophy.

"But..." Herscherik quickly shoved the drug in his hand into Ignac's open mouth. Ignac panicked and spat out the tiny candy-like ball as quickly as he could. In fact, he began forcing coughs out of his throat in an attempt to empty his stomach. Of course, Herscherik had only done this because he was confident Ignac would spit it out. "I will *not* let you insult my knight or his fiancée," Herscherik declared, glaring down at Ignac, who was now bent over on all fours.

"Prince..." Oran stared at Herscherik. Despite his tiny stature, his presence was immense.

Is that really Prince Herscherik? Marx was speechless after watching this scene unfold. Until a week ago, he only saw Herscherik as his youngest brother. His impression of the youngest prince was that his father adored him, and he was less outgoing than his brothers but a gentle person. Maybe that he was unusually smart for his age. If Herscherik had not reached out to him for help, his impression of Herscherik might have never changed.

This is his real self... Marx recalled his little brother smiling next to their

father... his little brother growing flustered over an unspeakable misunderstanding... his little brother running to and fro, in and out of the castle, all to solve this case. And now, his little brother was defending his own knight. Marx wondered which of these incidents were the most genuine display of Herscherik's character but then concluded that they must *all* have been.

Even as Herscherik pressured Ignac now, it was clear to see that this wasn't his ultimate goal. Herscherik was doing all of this to heal the heart of his knight. In fact, Oran was beginning to regain his usual expression and demeanor, which had vanished at Ignac's words. Herscherik had thus accomplished what Marx couldn't do two years ago.

"Now, Ignac." Herscherik spoke down to the man curled up by his feet. "Where did you buy those drugs? Who's behind all this?"

Marx was taken aback by his brother's question. "What's going on, Hersch...?"

"He doesn't have the ability to actually make these. It was originally one of the projects over at Research. It requires expensive materials, and making it is a meticulous process." Herscherik was confident that a man like Ignac was not capable of all that. Besides, the trace of records that remained in Research indicated that the drug was intended to strengthen the human body. It had been designed with the purpose of turning an average soldier into an absolute combat machine. At the same time, the drug would eliminate the user's fear, leaving them with a sense of euphoria. However, as both the project's objectives and experiments done for it were deemed to be inhumane, the entire thing was scrapped. All documents were locked away in the Research vault, with no intention of ever being seen again.

"But two years ago, an assistant removed the documentation. The drug circulated for a short time. In a few months, everyone involved with it was *out of the picture*, somehow, including the assistant who originally leaked it." The question was—why this specific drug? At that point, the lab contained much more valuable things, including some medicines that were thought to be practically cure-alls. Instead of that data, the assistant went for a canceled project about strengthening the human body. *They chose it on purpose. They had to.*

Herscherik theorized that whoever was behind all this mostly wanted field data for the drug and that the money was little more than a bonus. In fact, the money might have been more like a distraction. After two years' time, when any proof that could lead back to the castle had mostly faded into obscurity, the exact same drug reemerged. It was as if someone was starting a second round of experimentation based on their findings from two years prior.

"I'll ask you one more time. Who's behind all of this? What's their goal? If you help us out now, that might lessen the severity of your punishment." Herscherik smiled.

Even though both Marx and Oran knew that Herscherik would never go easy on Ignac, neither of them mentioned it. Ignac's lips were so tight they were practically white.

Oran casually held his sword where he was certain Ignac could see it. The well-polished blade reflected Ignac's face, drained of all color. His lips moved ever so slightly, but his whisper was so faint that it didn't even reach the two closest to him.

"Speak up," Oran threatened.

"I don't know...!" Ignac slammed the floor with his fist, like a child throwing a tantrum. "I... I just buy them from those kids! How am I supposed to know who's behind it?!"

"Kids...?" Herscherik repeated, the gears in his mind whirring. He didn't believe that Ignac would dare to lie in his current predicament. Then, he looked at the jar of individually wrapped candy, suddenly recognizing the logo. *No...!* Herscherik fell speechless at the unexpected revelation. More accurately, he *had* considered the possibility, but he had rejected it as unlikely. "I'll leave this to you, Marx. Oran, fetch the horses!"

"Did you figure something out, Prince?" Oran asked, confused by the urgency in Herscherik's voice.

"Oran, I need you to remain calm," Herscherik said, remaining completely uncalm. "He means the children at the orphanage!"

Oran froze in place. Herscherik slapped him out of his stupor and then told

Marx, who was also standing stock still, to arrest Ignac and send a team of royal guards or constables to the orphanage immediately.

Seeing that Ignac was trying to crawl away, Herscherik stepped onto the hem of his coat. “Do you want to run and regret ever being born, or be arrested now and only regret your choices?” Herscherik would make sure that Ignac *would* feel regret, one way or the other.

And so, Herscherik and Oran rode. Herscherik sat in front of Oran, clinging onto the saddle with all of his might to keep from falling off. Of course, Oran kept a hand on Herscherik to keep him in place, but riding a horse at top speed was still nothing short of horrific torture for the little prince.

When they finally arrived at the orphanage, Herscherik felt like he had lost half of his soul on the journey there. After Oran set him down on the ground, Herscherik took a deep, deep breath as if to gather up those fragments of his soul that had leaked out of him along the way.

“Prince, let’s hurry,” urged Oran. Despite riding his horse as fast as he could the whole way, his breathing was as steady as could be.

Herscherik was impressed by Oran’s physical prowess. He hadn’t led his class at the academy for nothing, even if he’d ultimately graduated last.

Herscherik nodded and followed Oran into the orphanage. It was already past ten o’clock at night, and apparently the children’s bedtime. Most of the orphanage’s windows were dark.

We have to get our hands on hard evidence... They had already arrested Ignac. If the person behind the operation were to discover that, any trace of evidence—along with the formula and any equipment for creating the drug—might just disappear, just like last time. Herscherik’s plan was to demand an answer from Ignac at the point of arrest so they could hunt down the mastermind behind the entire operation and put an end to this once and for all. But more than that, Herscherik wanted to get his hands on an antidote for the drug, and any research he could find that might be used to create one.

While an antidote would counteract the drug’s effects, making one would require extensive documents on the drug itself, which were nowhere to be

found in the castle. Almost nothing on the matter was found in the lab, or from the vault that even Kuro struggled to break into. The information that an antidote might exist had only been revealed when Marx's spellcaster of service had contacted a friend in Research.

That's why Herscherik needed those documents at any cost, but he didn't believe that he would find them in the orphanage. Someone had to be smuggling the drugs into the place. As far as Herscherik was concerned, the orphanage was somewhere along the line that connected the person behind the incident and the drugs themselves.

"Octavian...?" They encountered Baron Armin upon entering the orphanage, poking his head out from around a corner. "And Little Ryoko. What are you doing here?"

"Baron Armin..."

The Baron wore a friendly smile, to which Herscherik would have returned a smile of his own if it wasn't for the fact that the Baron was his top suspect at the moment.

"Stay back, Prince." Oran took a step forward, hand on his sword. "I've something to ask you, Baron... Once you call out those three men who are hiding around the corner."

"Octavian?!" The Baron's eyes widened in surprise.

Oran drew his sword, keeping his guard up. "Baron... I need to ask you about the candy the children were working to pack... I mean, the drug."

Just as he uttered the word, something flashed through a beam of moonlight. Oran calmly struck down the object flying toward him. Herscherik crouched down at the spot where they fell to find two small throwing knives.

"Baron...!" Oran's voice, shaded with a mixture of anger and sadness, came from above. It was evident that he had trusted the Baron. Even Herscherik hadn't suspected him; he had seemed so kind.

Herscherik turned to the Baron to find him rushing toward the shadowy figure who'd thrown the daggers.

“Don’t hurt them,” he pleaded.

“Negative, Baron Armin. They know about us.” A voice, which could have belonged to a man or a woman, answered him. The figure wore a dark-colored outfit that blended into the night and had their hood drawn low. The other two emerged then, dressed similarly. The only notable difference was their height and a slight variation in the type of dagger they held in their hands.

“So the ultimate mastermind is above even *you*,” Herscherik figured. He turned to Oran. “Take them alive, please, Oran.”

“Understood.” Just as he answered the command, Oran closed the distance between him and the trio in an instant. The suddenness of the movement delayed their reaction for a moment. Oran seized that moment with the swing of his sword.

Still, the largest of the three mysterious assailants blocked the attack with his daggers, one wielded in each hand. The other two broke away, putting some distance between them and Oran again. Oran frowned at how quickly they’d recovered after a surprise attack.

They’re well trained, Oran noticed as he leapt away from the man who blocked his attack. He couldn’t kill them, but he had to protect Herscherik at the same time. These were no amateurs, either. Against a trio of expert assailants, he was at quite a disadvantage.

But I won’t lose. Oran held his sword in his dominant hand and drew the sheath from his belt with the other. It was a dual-wielding style rarely adopted by knights, since most of them used a shield. But the Aldis were all avid fighters and honored strength above adherence to any style. Oran had made a point of training in every style that piqued his interest.

His top priority was to protect Herscherik, but Oran had no intention of letting the hooded figures get away. That involved taking them alive, as his master had commanded. It wouldn’t be easy to incapacitate them with a sword without killing them, but a sturdy sheath could be used to block, keep his opponents in check, and even strike if necessary. Oran could incapacitate them with well-placed blunt force, shattering their kneecap, for example.

Facing down his enemies, Oran’s heart was as tranquil as ever. His mind

remained unclouded. Despite the one-on-three critical disadvantage, Oran felt an unbelievable amount better than he had when he was nearly overcome with emotion upon facing Ignac. Oran knew that Herscherik had played a large role in keeping his mental stability intact there. The distaste he felt for royalty had dissolved at some point, with a new emotion about to take its place. But for now, Oran focused on the battle at hand, tightening his grip on his weapons.

Oran's white knight's uniform fluttered, and the sound of clashing swords followed.

Herscherik was enthralled by the battle before him. Despite the disadvantages of facing three opponents at once, being tasked to capture them alive, and having a little useless prince to protect, Oran handled himself spectacularly. As he faced off with the tall man who dual-wielded daggers, he continued to strike down projectiles at him from his blind spot, and even dodge (what his opponent hoped would be) surprise attacks from the third foe. All the while, he maintained his position to keep the three away from Herscherik and waited for a moment to strike with his sheath. This maneuver was much easier said than done; all this was a testament to how Oran was far more skilled than all three of his foes put together.

As his enemies' patience began to wear, Oran seemed as stable as could be. It looked like he planned to wait for the moment his opponents lost their focus. Besides, Oran wasn't in any hurry. He only had to buy enough time until back-up, as requested by Marx, would arrive. Then the battle was already as good as done.

I have to do what I can do. Herscherik looked to Baron Armin, who was visibly shaken by the combat that erupted before him. "Baron Armin!" Herscherik called. Seeing that the Baron noticed him, he continued, "Why did you sell those drugs?! And using the kids to do it...?!"

"I had no choice..." Baron Armin retaliated in a feeble voice. Still, his words had reached Herscherik through a pause in the clashing of swords.

"Didn't have a choice?"

"I needed... the money. For the orphanage, for the kids—I needed that money!" It was a genuine cry of pain. His business had plummeted since the

previous year, which endangered the orphanage. No matter how many times he requested, the government aid he received was nothing more than a drop in the bucket. He considered seeking help from Octavian, but Armin couldn't very well ask him for a loan after he lost his fiancée and kept his distance from the orphanage. With the orphanage one misstep away from collapse, he had been approached about being a middleman for this drug trade.

"I had no choice in the matter!" If he'd refused, the children would have been left to starve on the streets. Armin had to avoid that at all costs, and taking this offer was the only way to do it. "The royals and nobles of this country won't help us or even deign to *look* at the people in the gutter! They've lived their whole lives in the lap of luxury! They had it coming!"

Herscherik bit his lip. Baron Armin was correct in the sense that no royal or noble, including Herscherik, had ever lived like the orphans had to. Herscherik had every meal prepared for him in the castle, where he had a comfortable room of his own and plenty of clothes to wear. He knew that people who struggled to survive would have been envious of his lifestyle. "But not everyone is like that! Oran...! His fiancée, too!" Herscherik stared at the ground for a moment before making up his mind. "Oran's fiancée died two years ago because of the very drug you're helping to sell."

"Prince?!" Oran shouted back at Herscherik as he blocked a dagger from one of his foes.

The Baron Armin was struck speechless. He only started getting involved in the drug circulation recently, so he hadn't directly been involved in the death of Oran's fiancée. Even so, the Baron couldn't help but feel like the ground was crumbling away under his feet, discovering that the very drug he was selling had caused the death of the girl who had always lent a hand at the orphanage and took care of the children without so much as a complaint.

"That drug doesn't know good from evil. It just slithers into a void in people's hearts and drives them to tragic ends... Besides, everyone is someone's child. Or someone's parent. Taking a life is never acceptable." Each of the victims had people precious to them, and those who considered the victim dear to them. Parents who lost their children had lost their future, and children who lost a parent might even have become destitute orphans themselves. They might

have been destined for a more difficult life than the children at the orphanage.

Some might have said that was just the punishment for resorting to addictive drugs, but Death came equally to the noble and the poor, plaguing those around its prey with great sorrow. The tragic spiral would only continue. Moreover, Herscherik didn't believe that the death of some who took advantage of the nation's bureaucracy would make anything better. He was well aware of the reality of the nobility in this country. It was indeed the driving force behind the work Herscherik did every single day.

"I can't feed these children with morality!" Baron Armin cried.

Herscherik knew that this world wasn't fair—that bad things happened to good people. He was painfully aware of this. He subconsciously ran his hand over his pocket and grasped the watch within. *But still...* There was something that Herscherik had carved into his heart the day Count Ruseria left this world: *It's not right that the honest, hardworking people aren't rewarded for it.* He wanted a world where honesty paid off. Where evil was wronged. Where everyone could share their happiness.

"The world will never change unless we believe in our ideals," Herscherik declared. Quietly. Powerfully. Herscherik didn't assume that he was right about everything. He knew that he had to compromise and use dishonest tactics when it was necessary. Honest work didn't always put food on the table. In truth, Baron Armin *was* in a hopeless situation. That's why he had chosen to turn to crime. He'd been backed into a corner, and in the process had grown tired of the world. He gave up, convincing himself that a life of crime was the only way out.

Herscherik thought he had to change the world so that honest people were rewarded—that he had to stop the world from bringing sorrow onto kind, undeserving people. He knew full well that all of that was a clean, unrealistic ideal. It wasn't going to be easy to change people... to change a nation... to change the *world*. Even if his path proved to be a journey of a thousand miles, or a wandering without end... Herscherik couldn't help but yearn for that idealistic world.

"I don't care what anyone says! We have to voice our ideals! We have to *want*

them! We have to... believe in them!” Herscherik shouted across the battle—addressing Baron Armin, but more trying to convince himself. Herscherik knew there was that contradiction within him. He employed any means necessary to reach for his ideal nation and world. But if he ever had to compromise on his ideals to do it...? Baron Armin, in that way, could very well be a reflection of Herscherik’s future.

That’s why I need Oran. Herscherik turned to his knight, who was still in combat. He was sure of that fact, more than ever.

“What was I supposed to do...?” Baron Armin crumbled to the ground, and Herscherik turned back to him. “I only wanted to help the children... I didn’t want to lose them... I didn’t want to lose this place, either...” His hands covering his face, the baron curled into a ball.

Herscherik called to him. “You can’t change the past, Baron...” Things that had already happened were irreversible. Time could not be turned backwards. Regrets lasted for a lifetime. “But anyone can change the future.”

Baron Armin looked up at Herscherik. His eyes gleamed with a faint yet unmistakable light. Then, a door opened. Herscherik turned toward the sound to find a girl, Colette, peeking out of it.

“Mister Armin...?” Colette’s mutter reverberated through the tableau, where tension crisscrossed.

“Stay away, Colette!” Baron Armin called.

One of the trio, the one who’d first spoken to Armin, had turned to Colette and had begun to approach her. Instinctively, Herscherik started to run. He was closer to Colette than Oran’s three foes. In a moment, he stood between the shadowy fiends and the little girl.

“Big mistake,” the voice mocked, as the figure approached Herscherik with deliberate slowness, as if they were toying with him. Herscherik knew that Oran wouldn’t be able to protect him once he moved out of his position. If he had remained, however, he was sure that Colette would have been taken hostage.

I’ll give you a swift kick in the groin! Herscherik braced himself. While he didn’t know whether his opponent was a man or a woman, he knew that a kick

to the groin was an effective attack against either gender. How? Because Ryoko had learned that the hard way.

Oran clicked his tongue in frustration and moved to protect Herscherik. One of his opponents blocked his way. "Move!" Oran unleashed a flawless attack with his sword, yet his enemy deflected it in the nick of time.

As they clashed, a vile, grasping hand was quickly approaching Herscherik. Just as the hand was about to occupy the entirety of Herscherik's field of vision, it vanished. A loud slam ensued, followed by a cloud of dust erupting from the ground.

The shadow that had suddenly flown in now stood before Herscherik, protecting him. "You all right, Hersch?" his butler of service asked with a smile, clad in his dark-as-night garb, the moonlight revealing his refined face.



“Yeah...” Herscherik could only muster that short response. *I didn't know people could get blown away like that. It was like a video game.* Herscherik turned toward the motionless heap on the ground—Kuro's flying kick had completely knocked the person over. Just as their sinister grip was about to reach Herscherik, Kuro had swept in like a storm, saving the young prince just in the nick of time. To be specific, Kuro had run onto the scene at full tilt and had used the momentum to propel himself into a flying kick. His foot had struck the enemy square on the head, knocking the figure completely out cold. Kuro even did a backflip in the air before landing. This former-super-spy put acrobats to shame.

Are they dead...? Oh, they twitched. I guess not. Herscherik was relieved to see that the figure on the ground was alive. All three of them were precious sources of information.

“I told you to protect Hersch, you delinquent knight.”

“Sorry about that! What took *you* so long! Give me a paw here, black dog!” Oran countered, deflecting a knife attack.

“You idiot! I came back to the soirée with important evidence to find no one there but the Rose Prince!” Kuro shouted back and lunged at the smaller foe, who had been flinging daggers at Oran. Startled by the sudden addition of Kuro, they threw one last dagger, much less accurately than before. Kuro dodged the dagger most efficiently before slamming his fist into his foe's gut. They fell to the ground and groaned for a few moments before lying there, motionless. Just as the thud of their ally hitting the ground distracted the final fiend for a moment, Oran ended the battle with a swift strike of his sheath. The sounds of him sheathing his sword and Kuro dusting off his clothes echoed in the night, now silent once again.

“Ryoko...?” Colette called out, unable to grasp the situation.

Herscherik turned around and gave her a reassuring smile. “Colette. Will you stay in your bedroom for me until a grown-up comes to get you? Don't come back out, no matter what. If anyone else wakes up, tell them not to come out, too.” Herscherik watched Colette nod and close the door. Making sure that the door was completely shut, he approached Baron Armin, who remained seated

on the ground. “Baron Armin.”

“I knew... I knew that I was doing the wrong thing.” He never intended to remain involved in drug dealing for long—just until his business recovered. Armin planned to leave the operation as soon as he could. However, his business never picked up again. In fact, it only grew worse. His drug trafficking had become the main source of income for the orphanage, and the baron had begun using the children to hide it. Ironically, he had only ended up taking advantage of the very children he wanted to protect.

“What am I supposed to do...?”

Herscherik knelt beside the baron and looked into his eyes. “Baron, I don’t think you’re weak. You’ve always protected the children here. While everyone turned a blind eye toward them, you acknowledged them. You were the one who reached out a hand to those children when they needed it. That makes you a strong, kind person.”

Herscherik added, “Everyone makes mistakes and chooses the wrong path some time during their lives. You certainly aren’t alone, Baron.” Nobody was perfect. Herscherik knew full well that he was no exception. “The scars left behind by your crimes will remain. But you can make up for your mistakes.” Herscherik kept his gaze on Armin, staring at him intently. “This drug is too dangerous not to destroy. And *that’s* why I need you to tell me. Who approached you with this deal? If we can figure out who’s behind this... If we can get our hands on the formula, we can generate antidotes to help people avoid the worst effects.”

The more Herscherik had discovered about this drug, the more terrified of it he’d become. Not only did he fear the drug’s effects and side effects, but also the villains who would circulate a concoction intended to create fearless killing machines long after it was supposed to have been abandoned. Herscherik was afraid that this was only the prologue to a greater catastrophe.

“Baron Armin, please...!” A shiver ran up his spine, and Herscherik clasped the back of his neck. He had a bad feeling—an indescribable fear. Of what, he didn’t know... but alarm bells kept clanging in his brain.

Just as Kuro and Oran were about to ask Herscherik why he kept looking

around the place, Herscherik spotted what had given him that eerie feeling. There was a figure looming on the roof of a tall house, far from the orphanage. *Who is that?* Just as he was about to voice his concern, the three figures on the ground began groaning. They were all flailing about suddenly, clasp- ing their chest. Soon, all of them were motionless again.

“What happened?!” Oran ran over to them. After a brief inspection, he shook his head. Not a single one was still breathing.

“How...?” Herscherik muttered aloud, still thinking of the figure on the roof. He looked at the same house, but the figure was gone.

“Argh...!” Baron Armin cried out, all of a sudden. Herscherik’s gaze shot back to the baron to see him, too, curled up on the ground. “Baron Armin?!” Herscherik rushed over in an attempt to help the baron up.

Kuro grabbed Herscherik by the arm to stop him. “What if it’s poison, Hersch?! Stay away from him!”

“I can’t just watch him die!” Herscherik twisted out of Kuro’s grip and ran to Baron Armin.

“Hersch...? Prince... Herscherik...?” Now that Armin had heard both Kuro and Octavian address the boy, he recalled that the Seventh Prince had blond hair and green eyes and had just turned five this year. “Your Highness... Please take care... of the children. I am responsible... for all of these crimes...”

“...I will.”

Baron Armin coughed violently, blood trickling out of his mouth. He didn’t have much time left. “Tell... Octavian... I’m... sorry...” Even though he wasn’t involved in the death of Oran’s fiancée, he had still sold the drug that had taken her life. Herscherik nodded, and Armin smiled, reassured by the response. Then, he tugged Herscherik’s sleeve to bring him closer and whispered something in his ear. Herscherik’s eyes widened. After those final words, Baron Armin released Herscherik as he fell to the ground.

He would never stand up again.

Silence settled over the three survivors. *I couldn’t do anything... Again.* Herscherik tightened his fist. Even as his nails dug into his palm, he felt no pain.

He pounded the ground with that fist, over and over again, until he could finally feel something. That pain, however, only fueled Herscherik's anger toward himself.

They still hadn't gotten to the bottom of the case. In fact, the person behind the operation might know about their investigation now. While Herscherik didn't know how, he was sure that the baron and their foes were dead because of the figure on the roof.

They had someone else watching those three, who were themselves watching Baron Armin? That meant that the ultimate mastermind had expected the baron to be found out at some point. *And that person is so skilled that even Kuro didn't notice them...* Herscherik had spotted the figure on the roof by mere coincidence. Whoever was able to come that close without being noticed by Kuro, whose experience as a spy had given him an acute sense for when he was being watched, was no ordinary assassin.

"Hersch, your hand is bleeding." Kuro held Herscherik's hand and gently dabbed at the wound with a clean, white handkerchief.

"I'm sorry..." Herscherik apologized. Kuro smiled in return. He knew that his master was the kind of person to always think about others. In turn, Herscherik tended to neglect himself, which meant that those around him had to look out for the little prince.

"What did Baron Armin say to you in the end...? None of *them* had anything useful on them," Oran said, frustrated. The other three bodies had already been gathered in one spot, neatly laid out.

"The baron—" The sound of the door opening cut Herscherik short. A boy emerged from it.

"Mister Armin!" The boy with indigo hair the color of the night sky, Rick, ran toward them. "Mister Armin, what happened? Mister Armin!" Rick clung to the motionless baron. When he realized that the baron was dead, he sat there blankly for a moment before turning to Herscherik, who was frozen with surprise. "You...! You must've killed Mister Armin!" As Rick raised his fist, Oran held him back. Kuro picked up the immobilized Herscherik from the ground, retreating a few steps.

“Stop, Rick!” Oran shouted, as Rick continued to struggle.

“Let go of me, Octavian! Aren’t you on our side?! Or are you just like the other nobles?! They take everything from me! Why?! You nobles already have everything in the world! Give Mister Armin back! Give him back to us!”

“Rick!” Oran called the boy’s name again. It wasn’t Herscherik’s fault that the baron had died. But explaining that would require him to reveal everything about the drug trafficking. The baron wouldn’t have wanted that. Even so, Oran didn’t feel it was right for Rick to turn his anger on Herscherik. He was at a loss.

“Oran,” Herscherik called. He shook his head. The children didn’t need to know anything about the drug... in fact, they *couldn’t* know. Herscherik met Rick’s eyes, burning with hatred. Rick must have lost people dear to him in the past, and it sounded like nobles had been involved in it. Herscherik now understood why Rick had treated him, an apparent noble child, so coldly from the get-go.

The more people lose, the more they have to cling to something... in order to carry on. Just as Oran had hated royals, nobles, and even himself in the wake of his fiancée’s death, even a negative emotion could become something that carries a person forward one more day. Rick trusted and respected Baron Armin, and even considered him like a father. Despite his noble status, Baron Armin had earned that trust from Rick. Now that he’d been taken from him, it seemed that Rick needed a target for his anger. If that’s what the child needed, Herscherik would gladly volunteer. That was the only thing he could think to do that could help Rick.

As Rick continued to struggle and shout, the sound of hooves could be heard from the distance. The backup that Marx had requested had finally arrived. Herscherik let his shoulders fall. “I really am powerless...” Herscherik muttered just loud enough for his two men to hear. Those words seeped and dissipated into the dark of night.

Intermission: The King, the Former General, and the Witch

It was the end of summer, when autumn began to peek its head through the door and musical insects could be heard through an open window. Solye, the king of Gracis, was quietly tending to his tasks alone in his office, late at night. He finished reading through the report in his hand and placed it on the desk as he pinched between his brows with his other hand.

I must be getting old... Solye quietly grumbled. His usual workload had lately begun to weigh on him. Many people might have found it laughable if Solye, who still looked like he was in his twenties, had expressed this feeling in public. Inhaling deeply, Solye let out a long sigh—and not just because of his exhaustion. The contents of the report alone were enough to give him a headache.

The report he'd just finished reading outlined the entirety of the drug-related trouble that had occurred that summer, in extensive detail—written by the First Prince Marx, of all people. It included the full story of the incident from its history to the end result; anyone arrested in the process, dealer or otherwise; a list of the victims; and suggested solutions for the future, accompanied by the signatures of the heads of National Defense, the constabulary, and Research.

Notably, the document also included names of some powerful nobles who had been involved. It had managed to remain intact, without being brushed under any rugs or suffering censorship, because Marx had personally accompanied the report as it was ushered from department to department. If it had been passed up the chain of command under normal circumstances, Solye suspected that this document would never have reached him.

"I spoke with each department head myself and explained the situation to them in detail. They were all happy to sign the report." Marx had smiled, as if a weight had been lifted from his shoulders.

Solye looked down at the report again. It explained how Baron Armin, owner

of an orphanage at the edge of the capital, had been passing on the drugs to multiple dealers. Ignac Naivey, who had been arrested at that particular soirée, confessed that he'd been buying drugs under the guise of charitably supporting the orphanage.

They'd asked the orphans who they sold the candy to, allowing them to trace the dealers as well as several nobles and businesses who were involved in the circulation. This resulted in several arrests. Of course, they'd been careful to keep the details of the crimes hidden from the children. With the only exception of the orphans, who had been taken advantage of unbeknownst to them, everyone involved in the circulation now faced the full judgment of the law.

That being said... Solye let out another sigh. Most of them, including the son of Baron Naivey, were either nobility themselves or had the backing of powerful aristocrats, which made it difficult to pass severe sentences on them. Moreover, they were simply *dealing* a dangerous drug—they weren't the ones who'd stolen classified information, or even the ones who'd manufactured the drugs in the first place. Besides, Solye assumed that none of the victims' families would press charges, instead choosing to keep the drug use of the victims a secret in exchange. At the end of the day, the ones they arrested for drug dealing charges would get away with a few years of incarceration at most, especially if they paid a large sum as bail.

Whoever's behind this really knows what they're doing. Solye let out another sigh. As to how many loose ends there were, he had lost count. Baron Armin had only been recruited to distribute the drugs in order to keep his business and orphanage afloat, while the other dealers simply bought from the baron and sold them to individual customers. The orphanage had only been used as a distribution center, so no part of the drug's formula or any equipment had actually been discovered. The three unidentified bodies of the attacks didn't produce anything useful, either.

If Baron Armin had survived, they might have a lead as to his source. Now that he was dead, however, that door was closed forever. What's worse, the report stated that an antidote would take an incredibly long time to develop.

All this circumstantial evidence, and we still can't pin down who's behind it...

And there's the situation with Baron Armin.

Upon researching Baron Armin, it became clear that his business had only worsened in a manner that suggested a malicious influence behind the shift. When his business began to sink and no help seemed forthcoming from the government, the offer to distribute drugs swept in just in time, like a helping hand. *It's too much of a coincidence... Was it orchestrated?* That meant that even Baron Armin and his orphanage had been taken advantage of, and the ones responsible for it still lurked in the shadows, their agenda unknown.

Hersch... Solye then thought of his youngest son. He figured that Herscherik had pieced this all together, too. Herscherik must have planned to smoke out the mastermind behind it all, arrest every knave involved in the past and current drug trade, and ultimately eliminate the threat altogether. Moreover, the young prince must have been struggling against the corrosive forces that lurked within the very castle itself.

In the end, Baron Armin was taken out like a lizard dropping its tail. They had gained no useful information from the buyers nor discovered who was behind it. They couldn't even establish a meaningful connection between what just happened and the string of incidents that occurred two years ago, lacking evidence.

Solye flipped through the pages of the report. Herscherik's name didn't appear anywhere on it, a decision Marx had made to protect his brother. Marx was trained enough in sword and magic to protect himself, and furthermore he held the vital position of First Prince. On top of that, his mother was the Royal Queen and princess of the Principality of Parche, a neighboring seafaring nation that was an ally and important trade partner for Gracis. Antagonizing Marx would be a huge risk for anyone. Marx had calculated that much and elected to be the face of this investigation as a result.

Solye sensed that Marx had finally hardened his resolve. *I'm glad that Marx has grown, but...*

Solye frowned. Through Rook, Solye had kept tabs on most of what Herscherik was doing that summer. He was only able to do so because he had kept a close eye on Herscherik since the little prince was three years old. With

all that had happened, there was a chance that Herscherik's cover had been blown. And Solye guessed Herscherik was aware of that. Solye let out yet another long-suffering sigh.

The door to the king's office opened without a knock. "Excuse me, Your Majesty." Solye chuckled at what would have been a disrespectful entrance from anyone else. The gentleman who had just entered the room was the only one who could walk into the king's office this late at night, without the barest concession to etiquette. It was the Blazing General, the former general of the royal army—Marquis Aldis himself. He made unannounced visits from time to time, often quite late. This wasn't because he was being inconsiderate—he simply couldn't visit during the day. It would certainly cause a scene and thus tip off the minister's faction.

"It's been too long, Master." Solye stood, welcoming Roland into the office. He happened to be Solye's swordmaster, even though the king had only received lessons in between Roland teaching the king's second oldest brother when he was still alive.

"You're no longer my student..." Roland chuckled before placing his hand on his chest in a show of loyalty. "I can't thank you enough for looking after that son of mine, Your Majesty."

"No need for all of that. No one else is here... Besides, I haven't done anything at all." Solye chuckled again. "I only opened a door. The decision to walk through it was his alone."

It had all begun with a request from Roland to give his son, who had completely lost any drive and hadn't even attempted to try out for the Knights' Order, some sort of chance before he withered away completely. That was why Solye had created an opportunity: selecting Herscherik's knight of service. While Solye left Herscherik to choose his own knight, he had hoped that it would be Octavian. In the end, that had turned out to be the case.

"Prince Herscherik has a good eye for character and some quality that draws people to him," Roland remarked. "If I can brag about him for a moment, Octavian's the most talented kid I've got. Never shies away from hard work, either." Roland had trained numerous knights and soldiers over the course of

his service—of course, he had trained his own sons and daughters, too. As it turned out, Octavian’s talent outshone the rest of them. Roland was sure that, if he could develop his skills and gain some experience, Octavian would grow to surpass even him, the Blazing General himself.

“Even so, he has one major shortcoming.” Roland sighed. Unlike his father and siblings, Octavian had a pure heart and seemed born to be a knight. A knight was no knight at all without a master to serve. In fact, a knight couldn’t even reach their full potential in combat without one. After his fiancée’s death two years ago, Octavian had grown distant from the royal family, to whom he was supposed to swear his loyalty. Even so, Octavian kept up his daily regimen—perhaps because deep inside, he was still looking for a worthy master.

And now, he had found one.

“Prince Herscherik reminds me of your father,” Roland remarked with nostalgia. While serving as general, Roland had also been the knight of service to the previous king. “The last king and I often snuck out into the castle town, too.” Even before the previous king took the throne, they had often gotten out of the castle to explore.

“Ro,” the previous king always used to say. “I only believe what I see with my own eyes. These secondhand reports are issued from behind masks of loyalty, filled with lies that make them look better.” Roland now believed all of that might have been simply an excuse to get out of the castle, but he couldn’t deny that their experience had come in handy a great deal. Just like the previous king, Herscherik was striving to act on his own, making his own decisions on what was just or moral, as well as what actions would truly aid his country.

The previous king, famous for his keen insight into the state of the nation, to whom Roland had sworn his soul in loyalty, was gone. At the battle that led to his king’s death, Roland had protected the nation from an external threat as a general of the army.

“Ro... My knight and dear friend... Protect our... country for me.” The king had requested Roland to protect their entire country—not just the royal family—in his last moments. If he *had* asked Roland to protect the royal family, to seek vengeance for the king, Roland would have. Without hesitation or any concern

for tarnishing his own name, he would have become a monster of vengeance, raining hellfire down upon those who had hurt his master. Roland would have paid any cost, whether it was soaking the castle in the blood of the nobles who'd turned their backs on the king to line their own pockets, or ultimately facing the judgment of an executioner for his crimes. With his axe in hand, he would have slaughtered the entire clan of the man who'd killed his master.

The wise king had known all of this and restrained Roland with his dying breath. Neither the king, the First Prince, nor even the Second Prince who had been assisting the king had any chance of survival. The only royal who had lived was Solye. If Roland had slaughtered every noble responsible, the nation would have lost any semblance of stability, which would have been a prime opportunity for foreign enemies to invade and trample Gracis. So, the wise king had instead asked for Roland to protect their nation.

Roland had honored his master's wish and protected the rulerless kingdom from all invaders. Even knowing that enemies lurked within its borders, he continued to fight in defense of the nation. But even Roland couldn't overcome the course of time. Remaining at the top for too long would prevent new talent from rising. Eventually, Roland trained a few generals to take his place and then resigned his post. He left the future of the country in the hands of his young successors.

Now, as if it had always been destined to be, Octavian had met Herscherik on the brink of a significant change. Whether that change would be for better or worse, Roland didn't know. "I truly can't thank you enough, Your Majesty." Roland bowed again.

"No, if I was able to handle more myself..." Solye felt Herscherik was taking on more and more that the king himself should have been tackling. Even so, Solye couldn't afford to step out of line. If he did, everything he had endured to protect those dear to him would be for naught. On the other hand, Solye knew full well that he also lacked the power and determination required to cross that line. The enemy that dwelled within the castle walls was harrowing.

"How long are you going to stay there?" Roland called, not to Solye but to the figure who had been hiding in the room for a while.

“Aw, Roland! Why didn’t you talk to me sooner if you knew? I tried ‘reading the room’ for once, like humans do.” A woman’s voice, tinged with excitement, rang throughout the room. Just as it did, a woman revealed herself before them. The first feature that caught the eye was her amethyst hair. Then, one might notice her revealing dancer’s attire that covered so little of her well-tanned skin, inviting the lustful male gaze. Her right eye was scarlet red and graced by a beauty mark just below it, and her left eye was golden. Both were lit by a dauntless gleam.

“What is the Witch doing here?” Roland asked.

“Don’t call me that. I’m just the Oracle now. I have to talk to Solye about something.” The Witch’s lips curled into a grin. “Your kid’s hilarious, Solye! I like him!” She cackled, to which Solye could only respond with a chuckle.

While she appeared to be a young human woman now, this woman was a being who lived unimaginably longer than humans, someone said to have lived through the ancient days. Possessing more Magic Within than any human being, she was an entity known as a Djinn, who lived beyond the confines of aging and death. The very few who knew of her existence called her the Eternal Witch.

She had used a fraction of her vast magic to pass the castle’s barrier and infiltrate the king’s office, the castle’s most heavily guarded room, with ease. Even the sound of crickets outside the window had ceased, and there was no sign of the royal guard. These facts indicated that the Witch had set a barrier around the office, completely severing it from the rest of the world.

Djinns were beings who could cast extremely difficult space-bending magic without even an incantation. The Eternal Witch, in particular, could even peer into the possibilities of the future, to a limited degree, with her overwhelming Magic Within. While this served as her source of information as the Oracle, she was forbidden from speaking of events that might drastically affect the world. Not even a Djinn was permitted to purposefully manipulate destiny. So, she always posed a certain question when she met one of the select few humans who had the opportunity to actually choose their own destiny.

“How do you think he answered my question?” she asked Solye. She had asked many people a question similar to the one she had asked Herscherik, over

the course of many years. The question always asked if they were willing to choose a certain path, even after knowing that it was a steep and dangerous one. Most people outright disbelieved the Witch or gave up on their path after seeing her in action and hearing her advice. Herscherik, however, had a different response.

“I decided to protect those dear to me,” Herscherik had said. In a determined tone, not at all sounding like someone bending beneath the weight of his responsibilities, Herscherik continued. “I will achieve everything I set out to do. I will make it all a reality. I will not stop until they come true. That’s what I decided... Back then.” Herscherik gave a smile that was far too mature for his age. It seemed like he was both answering the Witch’s question and renewing his resolve out loud. Herscherik didn’t take the Witch’s words lightly, nor did he dismiss them outright. Herscherik accepted what the Witch had said and still stayed true to himself, declaring that he would make everything he strived for a reality.

“He’s the second person *ever* to answer like that!” The brazenly ambitious Herscherik reminded the Witch of someone. In the distant past, there had been one single person who chose to fight their destiny, just as Herscherik had. History remembered him as a hero. *Now let’s see how he fares...* The Witch had found a good subject of observation. She had been considering leaving this failing nation, but now there seemed to be some merit in staying.

“So Solye, I think I’ll do you that favor after all.”

“Really?”

“Yes. I promise I will never sell any information on Shadow Fang to anybody, no matter the price.”

Solye had earned this favor with the Witch years ago. It was a small action on Solye’s part, but it was apparently quite the important promise for the Witch. She had promised to repay him in the future, in whatever way she could that matched the favor done for her. Schwarz, Herscherik’s butler of service, was a former spy for the underground guild. Many held a grudge against him, even though Kuro would tell them to blame his clients instead; he was just making a living, after all. There were few spies more skilled than Kuro, and many still

desired his services.

When Solye realized that Kuro was working to cover his tracks but couldn't find a way to silence the Oracle, he made his move. Any weakness in his butler of service was Herscherik's weakness, too. Solye had decided to ask the Witch to pay him back, using Rook as a messenger. The Witch must have come to answer his request in person.

"You have my word. Even if someone were to offer me the equivalent of this country's annual budget in cash. Besides..." She laughed. Neither Solye nor Roland had ever seen the Witch this emotionally expressive. As the two looked on incredulously, the Witch happily added, "*I really* like your kid." With one last goodbye and the ringing of a bell, she literally vanished from the room, as if she was never there to begin with.

"Prince Herscherik has my sympathies..." Roland muttered. The little prince seemed to garner the affection of peculiar characters: Shadow Fang, Roland's own son, and now the Eternal Witch...

"He's *our* son, after all." Solye seemed to have given up on the matter. Herscherik was already far beyond his protection. All Solye could do was back his son up, as much as he could.

"Oh, yes," said Roland, recalling the initial purpose for his visit. "Prince Herscherik had requested something of me." He went on to describe the details of said request.

Having returned to the familiar confines of her lair, the Eternal Witch leaned back on her favorite sofa. Using magic after going a while without was quite taxing. As she relaxed, she thought of Herscherik.

I didn't expect to see a soul from another world. In addition to seeing premonitions, she had the ability to visualize souls. Souls cycled through their own predetermined worlds. The number might be larger or smaller depending on the world, but a soul tied to one world would never inhabit a life in another, according to the Way of the Worlds. But the Witch had seen that Herscherik's soul was unmistakably different from the souls of this world.

Like a black ink stain on a pure white cloth, Herscherik's soul stood out to

those who could see it. It was a stain on this world, and it should have been forcibly returned to its origins by the universe's process of purification. Despite that, Ryoko's soul existed here. Not only did it continue to prevent the Way of the Worlds from forcing it out, the soul was starting to set down roots in this plane of existence. By all accounts, this shouldn't be happening. It was a true miracle.

"Miracle? Impossible," the Oracle whispered to herself. Someone had interfered with the Way of the Worlds, summoning Ryoko's soul to this world. The Witch only knew a few people who could do such a thing. "As to who and why..."

The Witch only let out a sigh, giving up on deducing the culprit. Even though it defied the Way of the Worlds, Ryoko's soul *was* being accepted by the world she inhabited now. By definition, then, her soul must be in accordance with the Way of the Worlds somehow. "I'll just sit back and enjoy the show, like always."

It had been over 5,000 years since the Witch was born into this world and given a purpose... She had stopped keeping count at 5,000, anyway. She had lived age after age, watching all sorts of stories and destinies unfold. She observed the humans, who relished their (compared to hers) tragically short lives. The Witch viewed human beings as something to keep an eye on and a cure for her boredom. She adored those foolish creatures, and she was also well aware that her perception of humanity was greatly influenced by her encounter with the first human she had known to defy his destiny.

The Eternal Witch's shapely lips twisted into a smile. There was one more thing about Herscherik that caught her interest. Ordinarily, when a soul leaves a body, it circulates back into the world in order to be reincarnated. However, she had spied some particular soul that stayed closed to Herscherik, even after its death. In its purest form, derived from the Way of the Worlds, that soul spoke to her. The Witch, not looking into the matter too closely, didn't know that the soul belonged to Count Ruseria. Still, it was that soul's desperate plea that prompted her to further advise the young prince, as if on a whim.

"Now... What next?" The whisper of the Eternal Witch—the Oracle—melted into the air, unheard by anyone.

Solye visited the outer quarters, veiled in silence. Midnight had come and gone by the time Roland left his office, but Solye was struck by the urge to go see Herscherik before returning to the royal quarters. While he had expected his young son to be asleep already, Solye would have been happy to just see his face. When he climbed the staircase of the soundless outer quarters to the third floor, there was not even a trace of light. Just then, he spotted a shadow stir in the darkness.

“Who’s there?” Solye called to the shadow, calling upon his Magic Within so he could cast a spell at a moment’s notice. These quarters were only accessible by royalty and individuals who royalty allowed inside, but that didn’t mean it was free of unwanted guests.

“Pardon me, Your Majesty!” The voice of a young man answered. He lit a lantern that he must have had ready, and the light illuminated the man’s face.

“You’re Octavian, right?” Solye asked, as Herscherik’s knight of service stood in the faint glow of the lantern. Solye dissipated the magic he had prepared within him. As far he could recall, Octavian worked only during the day and not at night. However, Solye decided not to question the knight on his unusual hours but only declared his intentions for visiting the outer quarters. “I came to see Hersch. I’m sure he’s already asleep, but I just wanted to see his face.” Solye smiled. “Sorry to surprise you like this.”

In contrast, Oran looked uneasy. “The prince, uh, erm...” He avoided the king’s gaze.

“Has something happened...?” Solye’s expression and tone immediately flipped from kind to inquisitive.

Oran shook his head in resignation. “What choice do I have...?” he muttered to himself. “Please, Your Majesty.” He began leading the king down the hall. Soon, they came to another young man awaiting them.

“...Idiot knight. Escorting His Majesty here, against Hersch’s wishes? How stupid *are* you?” Herscherik’s butler of service remarked, first thing. Even the king, who hadn’t spent much time with Kuro, could clearly see that his smile was fake. Solye figured that the butler only employed a semblance of formality on account of his presence.

“Idiot knight...? Is that what you think of me?”

“Well, you’re also a meathead.”

“You’ve got just as many muscles as me!” Oran shouted, but he then quickly covered his mouth. Kuro gave him an icy stare. “The prince is still a child... It’d be better to have his father around,” Oran added.

“Hersch doesn’t want that.”

The knight sighed at the declaration. *This black dog’s as stubborn as a bag of bricks when it comes to the prince.*

“I think it’s high time I’m owed an explanation,” Solye interrupted. At this rate, he would never be able to see Herscherik.

“Listen here, Black Dog. The prince is sleeping, isn’t he? I think keeping this hidden any longer will only hurt the prince in the end.”

Kuro frowned and contemplated for a few beats before relenting with a shrug. Then, he turned to Solye. “A thousand pardons, Your Majesty. Prince Hersch is resting at the moment.”

“It *is* past midnight. And...?” Solye urged. If the prince was merely sleeping, neither of them would have hesitated to show him inside.

“Prince Hersch has been on strict bed rest for the past few days. He hasn’t been feeling well.”

“Bed rest...” The strange disease, exclusive to the royal family, that had taken his first daughter flashed into Solye’s mind. He could nearly hear the color drain from his face, though he wasn’t sure if anyone would notice in the dim light of the lantern. “How is he...?” He finally managed.

Kuro answered, “He is gradually recovering. The doctor told us that it was most likely just accumulated exhaustion, compounded by the change in humidity during this time of the year.”

“The Prince had asked us to not inform Your Majesty of the matter. I apologize for never reporting it,” Oran added, bowing low.

Solye easily guessed why Herscherik didn’t want him to know about this. Herscherik knew it might be a breaking point for his father. The king was sure

Herscherik's intentions were to keep him from worrying too much about his youngest son and thus adding more weight on his shoulders.

"You two are Herscherik's right-hand men. You have my permission to always serve his best interest above mine." Those of service were permitted to obey their master above even the king. In fact, Solye didn't fault them at all for complying with Herscherik's request. This only increased his trust in them. "May I go see Hersch...?"

Kuro silently stepped out of the way and bowed. Oran followed suit. Solye passed by the two men to see his son.

After watching Solye leave, Kuro let out a long sigh and glared at Oran.

Oran shrugged in response. "What was I supposed to do? Kick the king out?"

"Why are you even here, you delinquent knight?"

"To protect the prince. Sending his dad away isn't part of my job description," Oran answered, putting a hand on his sword. In fact, working at night wasn't part of his job description either. Even Herscherik had suggested that he return home at sunset, but Oran chose to remain of his own volition for two reasons. The first was that Herscherik's room was less guarded with only Kuro tending to him; even the living quarters of royalty were not entirely safe. The second was the real possibility that whomever Herscherik saw at the orphanage would return to attack him. Kuro himself could infiltrate the royal quarters undetected, and the butler had said that anyone with infiltration abilities at least on par with his sneaking into the quarters was a real possibility. So, Oran had volunteered for the night watch. At least until Herscherik completely recovered, Oran planned to remain by his side day and night.

"You're one to talk. You haven't told His Majesty that this isn't the first time the prince has been on bed rest."

"He never asked," Kuro said with a straight face.

Indeed, this *wasn't* the first time that Herscherik had been forced to take an extended rest like this. From time to time, like a taut string finally snapping, Herscherik became ill, having used up every drop of his strength. He always recovered after a few days, and his appetite remained as strong as ever, so Kuro

agreed with the doctor that it was merely exhaustion... Still, he couldn't help but feel unsettled seeing Herscherik like this.

Kuro shook his head as if to chase away those thoughts and faced Oran. "Speaking of, Sir Delinquent... I need to talk to you."

"Huh? What? And make up your mind, Black Dog. Am I an idiot or a delinquent?"

"Do you prefer Sir Meathead?" Kuro joked and then transitioned into scolding Oran about everything he could think of, under the guise of conversation.

Solye entered Herscherik's bedroom, careful to be as quiet as possible. Herscherik's shallow breathing was the only sound in the darkness. Solye carefully approached the bed to find Herscherik asleep with a pained expression on his face. Solye saw a great deal of the boy's mother in Herscherik, and he shuddered at the memory of losing his beloved. He placed his shaking hand on Herscherik's forehead. He seemed to have a slight fever, his neck damp with sweat. On the other hand, Solye could reaffirm that he was alive by the heat that warmed his palm.

The cool touch of his father's hand seemed to give Herscherik a little relief. His breathing slowed, and his expression relaxed. A smile bloomed on Solye's face. *I put so much on your shoulders, don't I, Hersch...?* Noble children of Herscherik's age were spoiled by those around them, without a single worry on their mind. But Herscherik instead had chosen to protect his country and family—in exchange for giving up any chance of a normal childhood. Of course the little prince was making himself sick. Solye lamented the fact that he had sworn to protect Herscherik but now he was the one being protected.

"...ry," a faint voice called.

"Hersch?"

"I'm... sorry..." Herscherik muttered an apology but showed no sign of waking up. He continued talking in his sleep. "I couldn't... protect... again... I'm sorry..."

Solye knew whom Herscherik wanted to protect. First, it had been Count Ruseria. And after that, Baron Armin—along with the orphans, all the victims of

drug addiction, and everyone who might end up suffering in the future because he couldn't close the case.

"I'm sorry..." Herscherik apologized, over and over again.

Solye also knew that Herscherik wasn't at fault and had no reason to apologize. In fact, Solye considered himself to be the guiltiest one of all. "You have nothing to apologize for, Hersch. You are doing so much. I'm the one to blame... I'm sorry, Herscherik. I'm truly sorry." Even though he knew that Herscherik wasn't awake, Solye couldn't help but apologize to him.

Solye continued to stroke Herscherik's hair, over and over. He stayed in the room until Herscherik's fever subsided and his breathing steadied even further. When Solye finally left Herscherik's room, the morning sun had begun to light up the sky.

Chapter Nine: The Knight of Service, the Games of Contest, and the Backroom Meeting

Fallen leaves had reddened in the Kingdom of Gracis, graced by the touch of an autumn breeze. The training grounds within the castle were teeming with much more life than usual. These grounds where soldiers and knights trained every day were transformed twice a year, in order to host the Games of Contest. The audience was filled with nobles and common folk of the castle town, eagerly awaiting the commencement.

The Games of Contest were a public event that any soldier or knight could compete in. Placing well in the Games would open doors for promotion—soldiers had the chance of becoming a knight, a position that usually required graduating from the academy. Knights, as well, had the chance of rising to the rank of royal guard, or even general.

Amidst the crowd of contestants brimming with hopes for the future, there stood Octavian Aldis, Prince Herscherik's new knight of service, sticking out like a sore thumb. The son of the Marquis Roland Aldis, the retired "Blazing General," Octavian had slightly curly gold-tinged orange hair and a nervous gleam in his downturned sapphire eyes. Most of all, he already looked worn out by the jealous glares from everyone around him.

Why am I here...? Sitting on a bench, wearing his flashy white knight's garb—the uniform of a knight of service—with his jacket pulled back to reveal his sword, Oran stared into the distance and tried to think of something else.

It all began the night the king visited Herscherik while the young prince was on bed rest. His coworker and butler of service, Kuro, had declared out of the blue, "Hersch's reputation is hurting because everyone thinks his knight of service is the useless Sir Delinquent of Meathead-ville, who barely graduated the academy. Go prove them wrong already."

"Did you just call me *useless*?"

Oran's protest fell on deaf ears while Kuro one-sidedly scolded Oran, practically tossing him straight into the biannual Games of Contest. Oran, who utterly detested being the center of attention, continued his steadfast protest against competing until Herscherik, having recovered from his bed rest, heard the news.

"You signed up for the Games of Contest, Oran? I can't wait to see you up there!" Herscherik hammered the nail in the coffin, showing an age-appropriate smile that brightly contrasted the sunken expression he'd been wearing since the incident.

Recalling Herscherik's smile, Oran cracked an embarrassed chuckle. Then, he heard a voice standing out from the crowd.

"Tsk. The hell is Rich Boy doing here?"

In fact, it had been said loud enough for Oran to hear. He let out another chuckle. An hour in this place had acclimated him to the comments made behind his back that he was nonetheless intended to hear. He let out a sigh. *I'm not the only rich boy here.*

However, just because he was used to it didn't make him impervious to it. Oran wasn't saintly enough to simply laugh off those comments forever. Some of the contestants were from noble families who were far richer than Oran's. In fact, the Aldis family ruled no land and ran no business, and thus was not as well-off as most other marquises or counts, despite holding a title. That being said, the Aldis family had always produced highly decorated and successful generals and knights, making them much better-off than the average commoner. That didn't mean Oran was sheltered, though. In fact, he'd been practicing the sword from a young age, and he'd been trained harder than most soldiers in the castle by his father, his sister (a woman just as fearsome as her father), and his brothers, who had served as knights on the frontline.

"He's the knight of the, what... Seventh Prince? I didn't even think we *had* a Seventh Prince. He won't last."

Oran's chuckle faded. He glared in the direction of the voice and pulled his sword closer to his body, resting his hand on the hilt. The soldiers and knights who were making those comments noticed that Oran, who hadn't reacted at all

toward any of their comments, had finally made a move. With an uncomfortable look on their faces, they scurried out of the waiting room.

Oran watched them leave and lifted his hand from the hilt of his sword. *If you're going to run at the first sign of a nasty look, don't start anything at all... They have no respect for the royal family.* Oran silently grumbled... despite his actions during his own tryouts.

At this point, Oran realized what Kuro was trying to say. Just as Kuro had said, their view of Oran was quite negative, and that directly affected the reputation of Herscherik, his boss. Herscherik was only five years old. With no patrons or actual life experience, Herscherik practically didn't exist to most people. Despite all this, Oran knew that Herscherik was willing to suffer in order to hold the world to his ideals. He knew how much Herscherik was willing to grind down his heart for the sake of others. As far as Oran was concerned, those who didn't know anything about him, and didn't even try to know, had no right to demean him. Oran closed his eyes. He remained like that until his match began.

The royal booth hosted the best seats for watching the Games of Contest and was reserved for royalty and their entourage. A match had already begun in the training ground-turned-arena, the contestants engaged in furious clashing of swords.

There were three guests in the royal booth: the First Prince Marx, who had just delivered the commencement in place of the king; the Seventh Prince Herscherik at his first Games of Contest; and the prince's butler of service, Kuro. Kuro, aka Schwarz, finished setting the side table with tea and a light meal before taking his place behind Herscherik to stay out of the way.

"Do you think Octa can go all the way to the top?" Marx jokingly asked. He actually had complete faith in the knight.

"Easy," Herscherik confidently answered. There was no way that someone who could go toe to toe with Kuro would lose to just any fighter.

Snacking on the sweets that Kuro had prepared, Herscherik watched the matches proceed, waiting for his knight to take the field,

When Oran was set to come out for the match after the next, Marx turned to

Herscherik. "Thank you, Hersch. For helping Octa and I work things out."

After the incident, Oran stopped avoiding Marx. In fact, albeit a little awkwardly, they began having normal conversations. They were beginning to recover what they had lost two years ago. Marx had always considered Oran, who never treated him any differently because of his title, his one true friend. He had hoped that Oran would serve him as his knight when he became king and had almost come to assume that would happen.

After the incident two years ago, however, a rift had grown between them. In particular, Oran avoided Marx from that point on. Marx considered Oran's actions to be, in part, motivated by compassion. Oran, whose reputation had been destroyed by his egregious behavior and academic performance, could have hurt Marx's reputation by association. But, because Marx had coincidentally bumped into Herscherik and Oran on that summer day and gotten involved in solving the case, his relationship with Oran was beginning to improve.

"I haven't done anything," Herscherik answered with a chuckle. Marx and Oran's relationship was their own business, as far as Herscherik was concerned. Herscherik had only asked his older brother for help. He might have been the inciting incident, but he hadn't done anything else noteworthy. Besides, Oran was an intelligent man.

"I'm sure Oran knew, logically, that none of it was your fault, Marx." At the time, Oran had to hate someone in order to carry on. By distancing himself from Marx, whom he had always been close to, he kept his sanity. *That's just my guess.* Herscherik couldn't help but smile, thinking about how Marx and Oran would become close again.

Then, nervousness flashed over his face, and he asked his brother, "Are you all right, Marx?"

"Hm? What do you mean, Hersch?" Marx tilted his head.

While his each and every move was picturesque, Herscherik reminded himself that this wasn't the time to be entranced by his beauty. "At the moment, both you and I have targets painted on our backs." The drug incident, with Marx at the helm, had been closed as far as the public was concerned. Because of that,

the popularity of the First Prince was skyrocketing in the nearby town, improving the reputation of the royal family as a whole as a result. That in of itself was welcome, but Herscherik was concerned that they had caused *too* much of a stir.

“This case isn’t over... We haven’t been able to make any antidote.” The process had already begun, based on the samples of the drug they’d been able to acquire from its dealers. However, the lack of any actual documents on the drug’s composition suggested that the development of the antidote would be an onerous task.

Even the examples they’d seized were significantly watered down versions of the original concoction’s power. The only way to develop an antidote was to first calculate the extent to which the drug had been diluted, then concentrate the sample before analyzing the drug’s composition and properties. That process would take an exorbitant amount of time. Besides, there was another problem to consider. Right before his death, Baron Armin had spoken to Herscherik. His words had been completely unexpected.

“Church... Be careful...” Armin had said. Judging from those words, it was entirely possible that the Church, the center of spirituality in this country, was behind the whole string of events regarding the drug. First the minister’s forces, and now the Church? The ministers apparently weren’t the only ones Herscherik had to worry about. Of course, even Herscherik couldn’t predict everything with such limited information. The best he could do was work with the knowledge he had.

“It’s a complex situation,” Marx agreed. In this world, “the Church” referred to the Church of Light, a religion that worshiped a variety of gods, including one known as the Creator. The Church spanned national borders, reaching all over the continent. It was separated from national governments, although it was undeniable that a religion so widely worshiped by the people influenced politics considerably.

“But it’s all right. We know about it now.” Marx gave a reassuring smile. The fact that they were now *aware* the Church may have a dark secret was huge. In exchange for the risk of exposure, they had unmistakably gained an advantage.

“I’ve always been unsure, Hersch...” Marx continued, watching the contest. “Ever since father told me all those things two years ago.” Herscherik guessed that his brother was talking about the same things his father had told him when he was three years old. Except, he imagined that his father didn’t present Marx, the future king, with the same choice he’d given to Herscherik. “If I do as Father did, they won’t come after our family, so the status quo would remain. If I resist, they’ll come after me. There are six more who could take my place, after all.” Marx’s voice lowered. “I will never let them take advantage of my brothers.”

Unlike Herscherik, who was a woman in her thirties on the inside, Marx was only seventeen. The young, inexperienced prince, without anyone to give him advice, couldn’t make a decision. “In the end, I’ve lost two years to uncertainty.” The more he thought about it, the more quickly time seemed to pass. Should he uphold the status quo for the safety of his family or fight against corruption for the sake of his country?

Under the guise of reconnaissance, Marx had attended party after party, or thrown himself into work, almost to escape the reality he was faced with. Before he knew it, two years had passed. “But that night, when you asked for my help, I felt like I finally saw the path I want to follow.” After Marx had tagged along with Herscherik, he became certain. “I love this country. I love Father, Mother, all of my family. I love the citizens of this nation, too. From the bottom of my heart, I want to protect all of them... That’s why I can’t let things remain as they are,” Marx said, with an embarrassed smile. “It took me a long time to find it, but that’s my choice. You may think I’m a coward, Hersch...”

Herscherik shook his head. He actually felt joy swelling within him, knowing that his brother felt the same way as he did. “Hersch, don’t worry about me. I can protect myself, with both sword and magic. And I’m the First Prince—it will be difficult for them to reach me. You’re the one who must be careful.” Herscherik, the youngest prince without any patrons, would be easy to get rid of. “Do your men of service know?” *About the stain on the royal family and the threat that it faces*, Marx was implying.

Herscherik had told both Kuro and Oran everything. Kuro had taken it without batting an eye, while Oran had to mull it over for a while. Seeing that he was

still serving as his knight of service, Herscherik felt secure in his alliance. “I’ll be all right,” he reassured his brother. “I have Kuro. And Oran, too.” He returned his gaze to the arena, where his knight of service had just appeared.

The Games of Contest were wild, both above and below ground. Above, there were the actual matches taking place in the arena; “below”, there was the secret gambling ring. Gambling ranged from simply guessing the ultimate champion to predicting the outcomes of individual matches. Naturally, all the participants had access to all kinds of information on the competitors.

Both the above-and the below-ground audiences collectively shouted in amazement at the sight before them. Oran’s white, tailor-made knight’s uniform fluttered in the breeze. This young man, the third son of the Marquis Aldis, who had barely graduated the academy and was widely assumed to have gotten his current position just out of nepotism, had been taking out his opponents the instant the match began. If they managed to clash swords even a couple of times, they fought a good fight compared to the others. Most fell to the ground without even getting the chance. He was the darkest of dark horses—not a single person had expected this.

Octavian soared to the finals without even breaking a sweat. And after that, even the final match ended with an easy victory. Not only was his knight’s uniform still spotless by the end of the Games, it was still in perfect order. Everyone could see that he was on another level than his opponents. Those in charge of running the event suddenly found themselves in quite the situation—the Games had concluded much too quickly. Meanwhile, the “house” of the gambling ring suffered a major loss paying out to those who bet for Oran to win all the way, and their shock was intense.

There were three groups of people who were assured of Oran’s victory from the start. The first were Oran’s brothers, watching from a section of the audience reserved for military officers. They knew that Oran had no chance of losing a contest like this. If he did, in fact, he would be welcomed home with the Aldis Signature Training Session, which was as terrifying as it sounded. His brothers knew that Oran was more talented than them, but they weren’t jealous because they knew that he worked harder than anyone to increase his

skills. He had all the right talents and the drive to be a knight, and furthermore, he was more dedicated than anyone else they knew.

After losing his fiancée two years ago, though, their brother had lost that drive. For everything, in fact. He continued his training, perhaps out of habit, but he became visibly unmotivated to do anything in his life. His brothers tried to light some kind of spark within him over the intervening years, all to no avail. So, when Oran finally found a place where he could use his talents, his brothers were overjoyed.

“He looks good,” Oran’s oldest brother said in relief.

His other brother nodded. “I think so, too. But he has a lot of work ahead of him.”

They watched their brother stand in his first spotlight with joyful smiles. No matter how much talent he had or how old they got, Oran was still their beloved little brother.

The second group was Oran’s parents and younger sister, seated in the general audience. They, however, were more critical than his brothers. Both his father and sister were quite critical of his technique—too late on this attack, too slow with that draw. Beside them, his mother simply smiled and watched. *He’s finally all right*, Roland thought, letting slip a relieved smile.

Roland had had a good reason to stop Oran from leaving the city. If Oran had been the type to find joy simply in improving himself, Roland would have sent him off with no hesitation. But, he knew that Oran wanted to better himself for the sake of others. Furthermore, Oran was weak, mentally speaking, without someone to protect. In a confrontation with someone of equal strength or stronger, mental strength would be the ultimate deciding factor. Roland was concerned that, if he’d sent Oran out as he had requested, his third son would have died without ever making it home.

Roland’s wife, now smiling beside him, understood that, too. In fact, she had opposed Oran leaving more than anybody. She was also the one that convinced Roland to send their oldest daughter off instead.

“We have much to look forward to, don’t we?” Roland’s wife called to him, as if she’d read his mind. Roland nodded in agreement.

The final group assured of Oran's victory, of course, was the two princes in the royal booth. "One in a thousand, ba-byyyyy!" Herscherik thrust his fists into the air in glorious victory. His uproarious excitement seemed far out of character for the young, mild-mannered prince.

"Hersch..." Marx looked at Herscherik, incredulously. "Did you borrow money from me to...?"

Before the Games began, Herscherik had asked to borrow some money from Marx. It wasn't every day Herscherik asked for a favor, and he promised to pay him back, so Marx had lent him about fifty silver coins.

"Yes. Don't worry, I had Kuro put in the bet for me, so no one will know. Now I have some money to work with. Oh, and please don't tell Father about this," Herscherik said and leaned out of his seat to wave at Oran below. Oran returned a knight's bow in return.

Good. He better have blown through a contest like this, Kuro thought, watching his gleeful master. Of course, he showed none of it on the surface. There were two reasons he'd put Oran into the Games of Contest. The first, as he had explained to Oran, was to showcase his talents to the world. Oran knocking out soldiers and knights like he was taking candy from a baby would surely stick out in everyone's memory.

The second was intimidation. Without any patrons, Herscherik was in a much weaker position than the other princes, which could potentially be inviting for anyone with nefarious intentions to try and take advantage of him. So, Kuro figured that Oran could act as a grand castle wall out in front of the prince, while he himself could remain behind the scenes. *Hersch doesn't know how much he's worth.* Kuro silently sighed. That was precisely why he felt so protective of him. But as a former spy with a questionable background, there was only so much he could do. *That delinquent knight... He gets on my nerves, but he knows what he's doing.* Kuro wouldn't dare say he *trusted* Oran. Anything but that.

"Does Octa know about the bet?" Marx asked.

"No, he doesn't. But I knew he would win," Herscherik answered with a spotless smile.

Elsewhere, there was a dark room used for secret meetings, where a very specific process had to be performed to enter. The interior was only lit with a few candles here and there, dark enough that no individual face could be recognized.

“...and the royals got in the way?” A man’s voice slinked into the room. His tone showed no emotion, only confirming the facts.

“Yes... the youngest prince,” another man answered. “His men are quite the fighters.” He sounded slightly older than the first.

“The youngest prince... I thought he only turned five this year. You’re sure it was him?”

“Yes, it was clear even from a distance. Small stature, gold hair. One of his men addressed him as ‘Hersch.’ There’s no mistaking it. Although...”

“Yes?” The first voice urged the other to continue. It wasn’t often that he hesitated to report something.

After a beat, the older voice kept speaking. “The prince seemed to take notice of me, even when I had completely concealed my presence.”

“*Your* presence?” There was some emotion in his tone, for the first time. “Interesting.”

“What should we do...? He might have caught on.”

“It won’t be an issue,” the voice declared with confidence. “We gathered plenty of data for the improved iteration. Let’s move on to the next step. But...” The man smirked, unseen in the darkness. “Put the information on the prince out there. We’ll leave it up to *them* to clean up.”

The conversation ended there, and the candles flickered out.

Epilogue: The Reincarnated Prince and the Twilight Knight

A few days had passed since the Games of Contest concluded. Herscherik, accompanied by Oran, had made it through the castle town to the hill that overlooked the capital, lit up by the setting sun nearly the same rich orange as Oran's hair.

"Wow!" Hersch exclaimed at the sight, as Oran helped him off of the horse. "Thank you for bringing me here, Oran!" Herscherik smiled, the setting sun on his back.

Oran squinted into the brightness. "*Thank you so much for bringing me here, Sir Octa.*" Oran could almost see the smiling face of his fiancée overlapped with Herscherik. "I used to come here with her, all the time." Oran took out the ribbon from his pocket, the one he was never able to give to her, and held it tight.

Oran had never returned to this place after her death. It reminded him too much of her. But now that the case, although unsolved, had been settled somewhat, Oran felt like he needed to visit this place again. He had asked to bring Herscherik, unable to muster the courage on his own.

"Thank you for taking care of the orphanage, Prince. It means a lot." After Baron Armin's death, no one had stepped up to help the orphanage, seeing it as a burden.

So, Herscherik had sent a request to the Aldis family. "I only requested the help of Marquis Aldis. I didn't do anything special." Herscherik gazed down at the capital below. "I'm so glad you won, Oran. This will keep the orphanage afloat for quite some time." The money he had won from secretly betting on Oran was all put toward the orphanage's expenses. Even if Oran hadn't won the Games, Herscherik would have made it work somehow—mostly by squeezing it out of the ones who were embezzling the orphanage's funds, likely as not. Still, there was no harm in having a healthy cash flow.

Even the money he had borrowed from Marx had gone straight to this particular cause. “I don’t have anything else to use it for,” Marx had said.

Now that the Aldis family was in charge of running the orphanage, no one else could interfere. No one would dare defy the Blazing General—they knew that the consequences might be hazardous to their health. General Aldis, who had too much time on his hands since his retirement, immediately agreed to it.

“I will train them into the best knights this country has ever seen! And my wife will teach them scholarship! Leave it to us!” he had answered with great enthusiasm. While the orphans being trained in knighthood wasn’t exactly what Herscherik had in mind, he was relieved that the Marquis had agreed to take on the task. And some measure of schooling would help the orphans work toward a stable future. That would be a great tool for them, whether they became knights or not.

The orphanage—later named the Armin Academy—would go on to become a well-known institution that produced many great knights and civil servants alike.

But that’s a story for another time.

Watching the capital soaked in sunset-orange, Herscherik continued. “It won’t last forever, though. We have to make some changes in this country so they can receive *proper* aid... Hey, Oran?” They were by themselves, without Kuro. Herscherik had turned down Kuro’s offer to accompany them, since he had something to say to Oran alone. “You once asked me why I made you my knight of service. Do you remember?”

“Yes. You never answered me, Prince.”

Keeping his back to Oran, Herscherik answered. “Oránge. I don’t need a knight who just does whatever I tell him to.” He heard Oran’s sharp inhale behind him, but he continued. “I need a knight who can stop me when I make the wrong call.” Herscherik thought during the tryouts that Oran was not someone to be chosen but someone who *made* choices. That he was a knight who would choose a master worthy of his loyalty.

Herscherik recalled Ryoko’s memories, which were already starting to seem like the distant past. She’d had a male colleague who had climbed up the career

ladder rather quickly; his quality of character had earned him trust from customers, coworkers, and bosses. He had taken care of Ryoko since she first entered the company, taking her out for drinks when things got tough. He rose from team-lead, to head of a department, and on up to managing a new branch in a short time span—faster than anyone else she knew.

When Ryoko met him again after some time apart, though, his gentle expression had vanished. He had a sharp glare in his eyes and his cheeks were hollow. The branch he managed suffered from poor reputation and performance. Ryoko grew concerned for him, but he insisted everything was fine whenever she reached out to him. Finally, she reluctantly contacted an employee of the branch and was shocked to hear about the situation.

He had taken a perfectionist approach to everything. This in of itself wasn't a problem, but he had tried to force his team to be perfect, too. He never let any little mistake slide, and he grew visibly angry every time someone made one. That wore his team down, and the resulting tense atmosphere drove down sales. Even Ryoko, who had no knowledge of psychology, could easily see that the pressure of managing a branch had gotten to him.

Ryoko's concerned calls and invitations for drinks went unanswered. Finally, she reported to their boss, which she had hesitated to do for the sake of his reputation—but at that point it was too late. He had fallen ill and had to be hospitalized. After that, he was demoted from branch manager and eventually resigned from the company.

She was later much relieved to find out that he had found another job, gotten married, and began building a happy family. One of the veteran workers of the branch had said that no one had put a stop to his behavior or even tried to talk to him. If someone had just sincerely listened to him, and perhaps served as a buffer between him and his workers, the whole thing could have been prevented. Ryoko blamed herself for not being that person. A change in environment or status also changed the person... for better or worse. Herscherik, in his previous life and this one, had read plenty of historical accounts and fictional stories of political rulers who had a change of heart that turned out to be for the worse, much to the detriment of their country.

Herscherik knew that he was by no means an exception to this flaw. "I know

I'm not perfect. I'm pretty full of shortcomings, actually." How could he know for sure that he wouldn't change, or that he was somehow special enough to always be right? "That's why I need someone to stop me when I start going down the wrong path."

"You have your black dog."

Herscherik thought of Kuro. "Yes, Kuro will always be by my side. Because that's what I wanted. But he would never *stop* me." Kuro was a former spy-for-hire. He had chosen to stay by Herscherik's side, but not for the sake of their country. "Kuro would probably do any heinous thing I asked him to. Even if I am wrong, he will never work against me." Right or wrong didn't matter to Kuro. All he cared about was what his master wanted.

"Oránge... I scare myself, sometimes." Herscherik was aware of the cold, dark emotion within him that felt like it was freezing him to the core. It was hatred, and burning wrath. Just imagining what would happen when those emotions took control terrified him. "What if I change, some day? What if I lose sight of what's important?"

Just as Rick had been enraged with him, Herscherik would hate anyone who took someone dear to him. There was always a chance that he would go down the wrong path, as Baron Armin had. If that were to happen, Herscherik might lose sight of his position, ideals, and dreams. He might order Kuro to murder someone. Kuro wouldn't hesitate, because he didn't care whether an order was good or bad.

"That's why I need a knight who's stronger than Kuro. Someone who could even stop him, if necessary. Oránge, I am counting on you. There's no other knight for me." Herscherik turned around, facing Oránge straight on. "Oránge—I mean, Octavian Aldis. I will hold no hard feelings if you refuse... Will you be my knight?"

Oran accepted Herscherik's sincere look in its entirety. The prince was concerned with what could happen in the future, creating a contingency plan for his own actions because he understood that he wasn't perfect. At the same time, the prince had declared his absolute trust in Oran. Come to think of it, this prince had wholeheartedly trusted Oran from the beginning, even when he

demeaned the royal family.

Oran truly believed that the prince wouldn't blame him for refusing. Herscherik could have easily just ordered Oran to take the post, but the prince only exercised his power when it was absolutely necessary. Partially he did this out of kindness, and partially from the understanding that he couldn't just order people to feel a certain way.

A gust of wind blew between them. Then, the twilight-colored ribbon brushed the back of Oran's hand, as if to give him a gentle push. Oran realized that he wasn't even considering the option to refuse. This was the path he wanted, the path was supposed to follow. Oran approached Herscherik, and presented his sheathed sword to him.

"Hersch, take this, please." Oran addressed Herscherik by name for the first time. Herscherik's eyes widened as he reflexively took the sword presented to him.

I've always been looking for...

Oran knelt on the spot, clutching the ribbon close to his chest. He bowed.

A master to devote myself... To devote my life to. Oran felt like a void in his heart was finally being filled. The following words simply sprang from his tongue unbidden. "My Liege, my body is a sword that cuts through your enemies, a shield that protects you from harm, and a staff that guides your way." Oran completed the pledge of loyalty and lifted his head, staring straight at Herscherik. "If it is your wish, I will live with the crime of killing my own master, turning the rest of the world against me... I will give my life to protect your cause." Oran bowed again, deeply. "I present to you, My Liege, with my sword, my loyalty, and my life. If you'll allow it."

Herscherik closed his eyes at Oran's oath. Then, he stared back into his knight's eyes. "I allow it, Oránge. Do not break your oath. If that time comes, strike me down with this sword," Herscherik declared and returned the sword.

Oran took it with a ceremonious gesture. "I won't, My Liege."

"What?" A question mark popped up on Herscherik's face.

Oran gave the prince a grin. "The black dog and I won't let it come to that,

Hersch.”



Herscherik stood dumbfounded for a moment. When those words registered in his mind, the prince lit up with a brimming smile.

In later years, the story of the Seventh Prince of Gracis would become a favorite tale for bards. Of course, the story of those who served the prince were a hit among children, too. In particular, boys were entranced by the story of the Twilight Knight.

The Twilight Knight was said to be the strongest knight the kingdom had ever known. His twilight-colored hair that resembled a vibrant sunset waved in the wind as he strode through countless battlefields, leaving behind numerous tales of bravery. However, the Twilight Knight's true strength didn't lie in his mere combat skills but in his wise choice of master.

Today, members of the royal family are taught to become the kind of person the Twilight Knight would choose, while future knights aspired to become like the Twilight Knight himself and choose their own masters. On the surface, these may all sound like praise to the Twilight Knight. However, the Twilight Knight only served one master in all of his life. All the glory he gained was all for the sake of the one he served. The one and only master of the Twilight Knight was Herscherik Gracis, the Seventh Prince of the Kingdom of Gracis.

The Reincarnated Prince and the Twilight Knight — Fin.

Anecdote: The Royal Prince and the Third Son of the Marquis

The snow had thawed and winter had passed, but this particular day was still too cold to really feel like spring. A young man walked down a hallway in the castle. He had hair that looked like pure liquid rubies. His eyes, which were the same color as his hair, gleamed with strong resolve. This was the Crown Prince of Gracis, son of the agelessly beautiful King Solye and the princess of the neighboring Principality of Parche—a princess known to her people as “the Jewel of the Sea.” In addition to the beauty passed down to him from his parents, his each and every move was elegant. Overall, he perfectly embodied his role as Crown Prince. Said Crown Prince, Marx, assisted the king himself and had been working closely with the military since his graduation from the academy, on top of his day-to-day duties.

On this day, too, he had finished his princely duties in the morning and was on his way to settle his military duties for the afternoon. Then, someone called to him. Marx stopped in his tracks as the figure approached him with a wave, bobbing his golden-tinted orange-haired head. Marx recognized the person. “Octa?” the Royal Prince asked.

Octa was a slender man, slightly taller than Marx, with a somewhat downturned pair of blue eyes and a gentle atmosphere about him. While his appearance was more soft than intimidating, he had proven his swordsmanship by winning the previous Games of Contest in a landslide. His full name was Octavian Aldis, the third son of the Marquis Aldis, whose family had produced generations of generals and knights.

“Sorry to keep you.” Octa—or Oran, as his master called him—gave a light-hearted apology, the kind one would use with a friend. If someone had heard, they might have reprimanded him for his lack of respect for the Crown Prince, but they were alone at the moment, and they were, in fact, actual friends from their academy days. Although their friendship had suffered for a time, they

were back to calling each other by their nicknames like they used to.

Marx answered with a genuine smile, one meant for a friend. “Don’t worry about it. What’s up? Are you going out?” He gave Octavian’s outfit a look-over. Octa was dressed in a humble outfit consisting of a white shirt and pants—a little underdressed for the castle. His curly, shoulder-length hair, which one with political aspirations might have ingratiatingly called sunset-or twilight-colored, was loosely tied at the back of his head. He didn’t look anything like someone who worked in the castle, but he dressed this way at his master’s request. Octavian himself was happy with how easy it was to wear around and completely ignored any glares from those around him.

Despite this, a good number of women in the castle had developed a fondness for him anyway. His position as the third son of a Marquis, his gentle face and honest character, and his strength as a knight were all contributing factors. As he was currently unattached as well, he was an attractive candidate for marriage to the single ladies of nobility and bureaucracy. To top it off, although he usually dressed in simple clothes unbecoming of his status, when he wore his well-tailored white knight’s uniform prepared for him and bothered to keep his hair neat, he cleaned up very well. The contrast between his formal and casual wear entranced these women even more—although he was probably the only one who didn’t notice. On top of all that, he was the knight of service to the Seventh Prince Herscherik. All in all, he was one of the most eligible bachelors in the castle.

Oran chuckled. “Well, I mean... you know.”

Marx nodded in understanding. “How long?”

“Three weeks or so.”

“Got it. My sickly brother will be resting at a retreat owned by a friend of mine and acquaintance of Marquis Aldis... How’s that sound?”

“Great.”

Their conversation was brief. It wasn’t the first time that Marx had completed a request for Oran without him ever asking why. Herscherik, Marx’s youngest brother, had brought a particular incident in the capital to something of a conclusion the previous year. Since then, Herscherik had begun retreating away

from the capital from time to time... which was, of course, only the excuse Herscherik gave in order to sneak off to various areas of the capital itself. In those areas, he had been gathering intelligence and taking care of anything that was troubling the residents.

It was actually similar to a period drama that Ryoko used to watch, where a certain vice-shogun went around taking names, but there was no way for Marx to know that.

Marx wasn't told in detail as to why Herscherik had started going on these trips, but considering how his brother acted during the incidents, he was sure that Herscherik had good reason. Marx had no issue at all covering for his brother, who traveled throughout the country while he was tethered to the capital, bringing back information and taking care of issues that plagued the local people.

"Take care of Hersch, Octa." Marx couldn't help but implore Octavian, his friend and knight of service to his brother.

"Of course," Oran answered, the significance of his words weighing heavy, despite his usual demeanor.

Marx narrowed his eyes at seeing Octavian like this and thought back to their first encounter. Marx and Octavian were both twelve years old when they'd met each other. In addition to his already refined appearance, Marx stood far above children his own age even when it came to swordsmanship and magic—let alone academics. While he could study magic and scholarship just fine on his own, he was left without a proper training partner in the art of the sword.

Moreover, his status as the Royal Prince was intimidating. Some approached Marx with ulterior motives because of it, but those sorts of people didn't stand a chance against him when it came to fair-and-square combat. His teacher had partnered with him on occasion, but even he had been intimidated by Marx's title. Both Marx and those around him were dissatisfied and uncomfortable with the situation. And then, Octavian was presented to him as a worthy opponent and source of protection for the Crown Prince.

That day, Marx had come to a particular training ground within the academy.

A student, slightly taller than him, approached him. "Prince Marx?"

“And you are...?” Marx asked incredulously.

With a hand on his chest, Octavian bowed. “Octavian Aldis, Prince Ma—I mean, Your Highness. I’ve been told to train with you...r Highness in sword.”

Marx held in his laughter at hearing Octavian stumbling through the formalities. “Aldis... Oh, *the* General Aldis.” The father of the boy immediately came to mind. Roland Aldis was one of the strongest warriors in the country, nicknamed the Blazing General in part for his roaring red hair, quite different from Marx’s ruby hue. The general was by no means an easy person to get along with. Most anyone who knew the general emphasized *the* when mentioning him in conversation. At that moment, Marx realized that his “*the*” might have sounded like he was insulting the boy’s father. He had to apologize.

Octavian, on the other hand, seemed completely unaffected. “Yes, my father’s *the* one.” The reply seemed like a genuine sentiment rather than simply playing along with Marx’s comment to be polite.

Marx nearly burst out laughing again. “Well... shall we begin?” He raised a sword, its blade blunted for training purposes, and faced Octavian.

After a few matches, Marx and Octavian had come to a fountain at the corner of the training ground to take a break. Marx turned the faucet and dunked his head under the stream that came out of it. It wasn’t the most refreshing water to drink, but it was just the right temperature to rinse the sweat out of their hair and face. As Marx dried his head with one of the towels that had been set out nearby, he felt he was being watched and turned toward the source of the feeling. Octavian had been giving Marx a look as he wiped the sweat from his face with another towel.

“Hm...? What is it?”

“Nothing...” Octavian muttered.

Marx had liked how Octavian didn’t hesitate like the others had during their training match. Now, this evasive response annoyed him. “Now I *have* to know. Just tell me, already.” Marx let his irritation affect his tone.

It seemed clear to Octavian, as he averted Marx’s gaze and blurted out, “I was surprised that you were a decent swordsman.”

“What?” Marx asked in blank astonishment.

Octavian saw the prince’s expression, making a face like he’d bitten into something sour. He bowed in apology. “Pardon me for saying so...”

Staring at the top of Octavian’s head, Marx felt an emotion rising up within him. It wasn’t unpleasant.

In fact, it was hilarious.

“*Pft...* Heh heh heh... Aha ha ha ha ha!” Finally, Marx’s laughter broke loose.

“Prince Marx?” Octavian lifted his head at the Crown Prince’s outburst. Octavian had a look of someone first encountering some bizarre creature in the wild.

Save for his family, no one was ever honest with Marx. Most everyone else was busy trying to keep the Crown Prince happy, and some even approached with ulterior motives hidden behind their pleasantries. Others feared Marx and kept their distance. Octavian was neither.

“No, I’m sorry. Don’t mind me,” Marx apologized, holding his sides that began to ache from laughing too hard. Octavian’s expression hadn’t changed. “Come to think of it, you didn’t go easy on me during our matches.”

Now, Octavian regained the expression of utter puzzlement. “I was told to train with you...r Highness in the sword.”

Marx barely contained another burst of laughter at seeing how Octavian’s face said much more than his words. “Even so, most go easy on the Crown Prince.”

Octavian didn’t answer, but his face was plainly asking, *Huh? What’s that got to do with sword fighting?* Evidently, he had barely thought about Marx’s title.

This did all make sense to Marx, though, when he remembered that Octavian was the son of *the* general. This kind of interaction was a first for Marx.

“Can I call you Octa?” The question had left his mouth before he knew it.

“What?” Octavian froze at this surprise attack.

Marx didn’t wait for permission. “Call me Marx, too. No more ‘Your

Highness.’” Without giving Octavian a chance to get a word in edgewise, Marx went on in rapid succession. “No formalities, at all. It makes my skin crawl to hear you force yourself.” Marx dramatically scratched his back, as if to underline his words.

Octavian opened and closed his mouth a few times at Marx’s decidedly unprincely behavior. “Ouch,” he snarled at Marx. “I tried my best, you know, since you were the prince and all. You sure, Marx? Once I stop, I’m not gonna go back.”

“Your efforts were wasted, Octa.”

From that day on, the Royal Prince and the third son of the Marquis were friends.

Years passed, but their friendship never faded. Octavian kept up a polite façade when they were around a lot of people. That being said, none dared complain that Octavian, a son of one of the most powerful marquis in the country, was hanging around the royal Prince Marx. As the Crown Prince, Marx studied statecraft as befitting a royal, while Octavian entered the knight’s curriculum. Since they attended the same academy, they ate lunch together when they had the time, still trained in swordsmanship together, studied together in the library... All in all, they were living it up in their academy life.

On a particular day, after they had both turned sixteen, Marx sat on a bench by the fountain, after rinsing his sweat off as usual after their bouts, and turned to Octavian, who was toweling down with his shirt off. “How’s it going, Octa?” Marx was still slightly shorter than Octavian. While they looked equally slender with their clothes on, Octavian had grown quite muscular, especially in the torso, from his day-to-day training as a knight.

“Hm?” Octavian turned to his friend, toweling his sunset-colored hair that had gotten wet. His eyes were silently urging Marx to be more specific.

The prince grinned. “With your *fiancée*?”

Octavian did a spit-take, had a coughing fit, and covered his mouth with the towel. “Don’t you have bigger things to worry about, Your-Crown-Prince-Highness...?” Octavian protested, teary-eyed.

Marx answered with a grin unbecoming of a prince. “I only ask because you’re my *dear friend*, Octavian. I meant nothing by it.”

Of course you did, Octavian silently grumbled. Marx only gestured for Octavian to answer. “Fine, really...” Octavian relented, avoiding his friend’s gaze as he did.

However, his uncharacteristic demeanor only served to widen Marx’s smirk. “I hear she makes you lunch every day.”

“It’d be rude not to eat it...” Octavian’s fiancée always brought him lunch, as she studied cooking in preparation for her marriage. They were occasionally found taking lunch together in the courtyard when their schedules aligned, but Octavian hadn’t known that they were being watched. Marx had once caught a glimpse of what she’d cooked Octavian for lunch—it was a healthy meal that looked very tasty. Marx had asked for a taste, but Octavian steadfastly refused.

“I’ve heard you never leave her side at soirées, either, like a guard dog.”

“Cuz some jerks always show up and bother her...”

The couple had made their high society debut once they both turned sixteen, as had Marx. As the daughter of an old-money aristocrat who ran a business, Octavian’s fiancée was invited to a great deal of social events. Each time, Octavian tried his best to accompany her and never leave her side, scaring off men that approached her. While he insisted that it was for her sake, it was clear to see that he was a little jealous—if not a bit insecure. Of course, most people around them watched the new couple with nothing more than quiet encouragement.

“I heard you’ve been giving her those ribbons that she always wears.”

“How did you—!?” Octavian snapped back to Marx, his eyes more expressive than his words.

Marx returned a teasing grin. “And her *new* ribbons are blue, orange... Where have I seen those colors before?”

Octavian’s fiancée had long hair. Whether she was at the academy or out on the town, she’d always kept her hair wrapped in a bun or braided until her fiancée began giving her those ribbons. Before they’d turned sixteen, she wore

mostly feminine colors like yellow, red, and pink. After her debut into high society, she more often wore orange or blue—the colors of her fiancé's hair and eyes. It was clear to anyone what that meant.

“Apparently, it's quite a trend in high society for men to gift their fiancée accessories in colors that will remind them of the giver... Thanks to a certain someone, of course.”

Finally, Octavian covered his face with his hands and crouched down on the spot. His ears, not covered by his hands, were bright red. “Give me a break...” Octavian managed.

Seeing that his friend, who always remained steadfast and bold, was flushed with embarrassment, Marx's smirk faded into a smile. “Sorry. I envy you, actually.” Marx wasn't jealous but envious.

Octavian, his blushing having subsided a bit, crooked his neck as he stood up. “What lady *wouldn't* want you, Marx?” In fact, many girls *did* have a crush on Prince Marx. In addition to being the Crown Prince, Marx had unsurpassed looks and a gentlemanly character, even though he outranked them all.

Seeing that Marx fell silent, Octavian looked serious all of a sudden. “Just... don't mess around with married women.”

“As if!” Marx shouted, throwing a towel at Octavian. Octavian simply grabbed the towel mid-air. After a beat, they began laughing together, their joy echoing through the training grounds. “Really, I'm jealous that you always think of each other.” Marx wiped at the corners of his eyes, having laughed himself to tears. He was envious that Octavian and his fiancée wanted for nothing but each other, cared for each other, and loved each other. Their future seemed so bright to Marx.

“I can't help but think of my position, though.” Marx was the Crown Prince, after all. In the future, he would need to marry a proper queen. More than one queen, if need be. It wasn't that Marx detested the idea. His father, in fact, had five (now sadly four) queens in addition to his first. And, perhaps thanks to his generous character, the queens got along like sisters. Though, the fact that the queens were aware of the situation when they came to wed Solye definitely helped, and they knew that they would disappoint him if they fought.

Marx knew that his father wasn't the kind of person to force him into a marriage against his will. The thing was, the more people told Marx not to think of his country in such matters, the more concerned he became. And whoever would become his queen would share the weight of ruling a nation with him. Considering all that, Marx couldn't simply choose his partner out of love.

"You really were born to be a prince, Marx... Make sure to take it easy once in a while." Octavian knew who Marx had feelings for, so he didn't say anything more. However, if his friend were to ever ask for help, he would be there for him the best he could, no matter the results. "Just come to me when you're in a bind. I'm your future knight of service, remember?" Octavian approached Marx and extended his hand.

This was something he had promised Marx when he began training as a knight. He would graduate from the academy, become a knight, then royal guard, then general. After that, he would become Marx's knight of service to support his friend in his kingly duties. That was Octavian's goal in life.

Marx smiled at the gesture. "Thank you, Octa. I'm counting on you. And you can come to me any time, too." Marx seized Octavian's hand.

"Of course." Octavian pulled Marx up by the hand. Their hands remained in each other's for a while longer.

Neither of them doubted at the time that their promise would one day come to fruition.

The summer after, Octavian lost his one and only fiancée.

When Octavian returned to the academy after some time away, Marx spotted him and ran straight over. When he'd last seen Octavian, he had been rushing out of the academy upon receiving the terrible news. That had been a week ago.

Octavian, color drained from his face and much thinner than before, took Marx to the academy field out back, where they could be alone.

"Are you all right, Octa? I'm sorry about—" *Her*, Marx was about to say, when Octavian's sharp glare silenced him.

"I need a favor from you, Marx," Octavian said, in a strangely calm, cold tone.

“She didn’t die of illness. She took some dangerous drug, and... that’s what killed her.

“Dangerous drug?”

The news of her death had already reached high society, let alone the academy. While theirs was a betrothal arranged by their parents, they were still the perfect couple that everyone adored—which meant that a good number of people were also jealous of them. Octavian, though, never seemed to let the looks of others get to him.

And now, tragedy had struck the picture-perfect couple. While some members of high society sympathized with Octavian’s loss, most of them still gossiped about it over tea, all over the city. Rumors ranged from a mere bad case of the summer flu, all the way to much more heinous stories that Octavian wouldn’t dare share with anyone. Of course, those rumors were hardly believable, which made Marx think that the summer flu story must have been the truth. But now, his brows were pinched together at the mention of a “drug.”

“It’s my fault.” Octavian’s face twisted. “That drug is dangerous. It seems like a lot of nobles have fallen into taking it.” Octavian had been researching the incident on his own, as far as Marx could tell. “Still, the constabulary’s acting like nothing ever happened. ‘No circumstances seem out of the ordinary,’ they said.” Octavian grabbed Marx’s arm. He bowed deep, pleading. “Father works for the military, so he can’t officially meddle with the constabulary. I know I’m taking advantage of your title, Marx... But you’re the only person I have left.” Octavian kept his head down. “I’m so sorry.”

“All right. I got it. You can count on it.”

However, Marx was left bewildered at the constable’s statement when he arrived at the constabulary. “What?” he asked.

“As I’ve explained, Your Highness, we have already concluded the investigation for that case and have no plan to reopen it.” The constable who handled the case answered with a straight face, but he evidently considered the interaction a waste of time.

“It’s way too early for that.”

“It was my boss’s call,” he said, rising from his seat. “Your Highness has mentioned a drug, but we haven’t received any such report from the family of the deceased.”

“What?”

“General Aldis’s son has visited us before... We have no sample of this drug, nor any victims. How are we supposed to *find* this supposed culprit?” The constable smirked sardonically then bowed to conceal it. “Your Highness, there is nothing more I can say on the matter. I am terribly sorry.”

“Understood. Thank you for your time. Excuse me.” Reigning in his anger for the constable’s lackluster attitude, Marx left the constabulary.

Walking through the archway that connected the west and central section of the castle, Marx recalled that recent interaction. He could understand why her family had not made a public statement. The family’s reputation, as well as hers, would suffer if it came to light that she had died from a drug addiction.

Even so, Marx felt that the mere possibility of a dangerous drug out there warranted a more thorough investigation. *Is it just laziness...?* He could imagine that it was an arduous case to work on. People who avoided arduous work weren’t exactly hard to find.

Just then, Marx sensed a presence and stopped in his tracks. A middle-aged man with a large stature and hazel eyes and hair stood before him, giving off an almost intimidating air.

“My, my. Prince Marx.”

“Minister Barbosse.” Marx answered Barbosse’s ceremonious bow with a nod.

With a smile incongruent to his intimidating face, Barbosse began chatting with Marx. “How are things in the academy? I’ve heard that Your Highness excels in sword and magic, as well as in academics. The future of Gracis Kingdom is bright.”

Marx wore his Royal Prince mask in the shape of a friendly smile. He was used to nobles showering him with compliments.

After a course of smalltalk, Barbosse gave another ceremonious bow. “I must be going...” he said and moved to the side of the passageway to give way to Marx. Just as Marx began to pass him, Barbosse added, with a tone just as nonchalant as the one he used for their small talk, “Oh, Your Highness? The constabulary is no place for students. They are quite busy with *serious* cases... If Your Highness may notify your friend as much.”

Marx was at a loss for words, but he kept walking away to keep Barbosse from discovering that fact.



How does Minister Barbosse know that...? Smiling at the bureaucrats parting the way for him with his princely smile, Marx couldn't shake Barbosse's words out of his mind. He shook his head, as if to chase out those thoughts. *Now's not the time.* Right now, he had to deal with this supposed drug problem. If the constabulary closed the case, he just had to *make* them reopen it. *I didn't want to do this... But it's for Octa.* Marx hardened his resolve.

He waited until night and visited his father's room.

"Marx?" Solye seemed surprised at his son's sudden visit.

"There's something I want to report to you, Father."

Solye urged Marx to continue, seeing his son's uncharacteristically serious expression. After hearing everything Marx had to say, Solye let out a long sigh. "Listen carefully, Marx." He went on to explain how, if the constabulary had already closed the case, they needed more evidence that warranted a reopening. Besides, the victim or their family had to request the investigation, too. While Octavian had the diary written by his fiancée, they couldn't prove its validity. Octavian's requests didn't carry the same weight as her family's requests, since he was still only her fiancé. Although Solye had the power to order a reinvestigation, if the reopening didn't yield any new evidence, the king would be held responsible.

"No..." Marx tightened his fists.

Solye added, "They've set it up this way."

"Father?" Marx asked, confused.

Solye turned to the corner of the room, where Rook had been standing by. "Can you pursue this, Rook?"

"Tough, but I'll try... Don't hold your breath." Rook exited the room.

Solye watched him leave and uttered an incantation to set up a barrier in the room. "Marx, I need you to listen very carefully to what I am about to say."

His father told Marx everything. About how the previous king, his uncles, and his older sister had died. About his father's crimes and the control Barbosse and his faction held. About the current state of their nation. After Solye explained it

all, Marx stood there dumbfounded. “Marx, you’re the Crown Prince. I want you to make your decision with that in mind. And no matter what you choose to do, I will always love you.”

“What should I do...?” Marx begged for an answer.

Solye shook his head. “You have to be the one to decide, Marx.”

In the end, Rook couldn’t track down anything on the drug that had killed Octavian’s fiancée. He had found some trace of its circulation in high society, but all concrete evidence had seemingly vanished into thin air.

With a heavy heart, Marx met Octavian in the field. His heart was weighed down not only by thoughts of the trafficking scandal, but those of his father, his family, the minister, and all the nobles... All of it was a heavy burden on Marx’s heart.

Barbosse knew about Octavian, too. Marx was terrified that he would harm his only friend outside of his family.

“Marx! How did it go...?” Octavian looked at him with anticipation.

Marx couldn’t bear to meet his friend’s eyes. “I’m sorry...” A faint voice barely made it past his lips.

“What?” Octavian didn’t hear it. He took a step closer.

“I’m sorry, Octa.”

Octavian understood through those words and the look on Marx’s face. “Sorry?! For what, Marx?!” Just as before, he gripped Marx’s arms with force. This time, he did so in anger. It hurt, but Marx said nothing. “Marx!” Octavian’s shout echoed through the field.

Even still, Marx could not look into his eyes. “I’m sorry...” This utterance made Octavian loosen his grip. He turned his back on Marx and began walking away. “Octa!” Marx threw his voice at Octavian’s back. “Will you still be my knight?!” If Octavian had answered, if he had given one small nod, Marx was ready to tell him everything. He was scared. More than anything, he was afraid of losing the people he loved the most. With Octavian at his side, somehow, Marx felt like they could take on the world together.

“Octa!” Marx called again, praying that his friend would turn around. Octavian never did.

When I saw him here again, I almost lost it after I found out he was Hersch’s knight. Marx let out a chuckle at his past-self. He was the one who broke his promise first, but he still couldn’t help but feel betrayed by Octavian.

At the end of the day, Marx realized he wasn’t fit to be Octavian’s master.

On that day when they parted ways, Marx tried to lean on Octavian instead of helping his friend. He wanted to escape from his indecision. But Herscherik was different. He tried to help Octavian and support him. That was the difference between Marx and Herscherik. While his younger brother had shown him up, he felt no jealousy. Marx knew that Herscherik would never rub that in his face. His little brother was always sincere and kind to everyone. *That’s why everyone trusts him.* Marx smiled, thinking of his youngest brother.

“Marx?”

“Just a funny thought,” Marx answered his old friend like he had in the old days. “Are you leaving now?”

“Sometime today. Hersch is packing right now...”

“Then, let me see him before you leave. His room is in the outer quarters?” Marx confirmed and turned back down the hallway they had been walking through.

Octavian chased after him and stopped at his side. “Yes, but are you good on time?”

“My little brother’s going on a retreat. My time’s always good for that.”

Octavian snickered that Marx was still playing along. “Can’t get enough of your little brother?”

“He’s my youngest *and* most reckless brother, after all.” Marx patted Octavian on the shoulder, twice. “So, keep Hersch safe, Sir Knight of Service.”

“With my life.” Octavian answered with resolve.

When Marx arrived at Herscherik’s room in the outer quarters, his brain froze

at the sight before him.

“Oh, Marx.” The voice was unmistakably Herscherik’s, but Marx failed to find his brother anywhere in the room. The person before him had their father’s emerald eyes, but Herscherik’s soft golden hair that resembled a ray of spring sunshine somehow draped down to his waist instead of not even reaching his shoulders. His fair cheeks were slightly tinted with rouge, and he was wearing a one-piece dress made of emerald fabric that matched his eyes and decorated with white ruffles.

Everything suited Herscherik almost *too* well. He was more adorable than most noble girls.

Even so, Marx was sure that it was his brother standing before him. “Herscherik...?” he asked—though without complete confidence.

Then, his younger brother proudly explained that he had decided to cross-dress in order to protect his identity when traveling the regions outside of the capital.

Won’t that draw more attention...? Marx kept his concern to himself, since Herscherik seemed so happy with his handiwork.

Marx’s concern would, indeed, come to fruition, but that’s another story.

The Royal Prince and the Third Son of the Marquis — Fin.

Postscript

Hello. Nobiru Kusunoki, here. I've started doing radio calisthenics every morning for my health! On another note, thank you for picking up a copy of *Herscherik Volume 2 - The Reincarnated Prince and the Twilight Knight*. Just like volume 1, I won't write any spoilers here, so feel free to read through my ramblings *before* getting to the good stuff.

Thanks to your support, we've arrived at the second volume of the Herscherik series. I ended up asking my editor M for... a deadline extension. Yep. I had the gall, after publishing just a single volume, to ask for an extension. I am well aware that this request made you wait longer for the volume, but as an active member of the workforce, I have a day job to put food on the table! Busy season will be the *death* of me! With newfound respect for the writers who keep their day jobs *and* publish quickly... I acquired said extension from my trusty editor M before beginning work on the volume.

I had written the online version of Twilight Knight in kind of a blind flurry, so there was a lot I wanted to add and expand upon publishing. I added more foreshadowing, emotional descriptions, entire scenes... caught incredibly embarrassing typos along the way, to find that the end-product was a whopping 130% longer than the online version! I didn't expect volume 2 to have more pages than the first. Even I'm surprised at how much I added. I guess it's in my blood—I'm one of those secretly-perfectionist AB-types. Well, I hope you enjoyed *The Reincarnated Prince and the Twilight Knight*, which turned out to be full of surprises for the author, too.

Finally, thank you to everyone who picked up the volume, everyone who's followed me since the online version, the publisher Futabasha, my dear editor M who not only puts up with me but is even *nice* about it, Arico who beautifully draws the characters as I've imagined them, the designer who came up with the impeccable cover, and QA who caught my typos... everyone involved in the publishing process, and thanks to my family who kept me sane as I kept adding to the story and even kept me fed. Thanks to all of you, Herscherik Vol. 2 was

able to come out. I can't thank you enough!

I hope I'll see you in the next volume. Rambling over.

— Nobiru Kusunoki

The
Reincarnated Prince
and the
Twilight Knight

The Epic Tale of the Reincarnated Prince Herscherik
NOBIRU KUSUNOKI

Illustrator **ARICO**



Yes. I'm happy to
see you're doing well,
Brother Marx.

It's been a long time.
How are you?

Marx

First Prince of Gracis

Octavian

Knight of Service
to Herscherik

Herscherik

(Ryoko Hayakawa)

Seventh Prince of Gracis
34 y/o otaku woman
in previous life



Schwarz (Kuro)

Butler of Service to Herscherik

Here he is,
Oracle.

Took you longer
than I expected...

The Oracle



*I allow it, Oránge.
Do not break your oath.
If that time comes,
strike me down with
this sword.*

*I present you,
My Liege, with my sword,
my loyalty, and my life...
if you'll allow it.*



I'm sorry...

*Don't apologize,
Hersch. You've
done so much.*

*It's my fault...
I'm sorry, Hersch...
I'm so sorry.*

Solye

King of Gracis
Father to Herscherik













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